

A shirtless man with short brown hair is lying on a bed with white, wrinkled sheets. He is positioned on his stomach, with his arms bent and hands behind his head. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The lighting is soft, creating shadows on the bed sheets.

Bulletproof

MARY CALMES

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Dreamspinner Press

Dedication

Thank you to my husband for keeping the kids busy so I could finish, to Tiana and Roy for looking over the Pidgin, and to my fans who asked when there would be more Jory.

CHAPTER
ONE

Chapter One

IN MY life I have been kidnapped twice, shot at, hit, chased down in a car, and yanked off the street. It sort of numbs you to surreal experiences. Because of all that, my brother Dane is certain that my gauge that senses weirdness is way out of whack. It's possible. Things that other people, normal people, think are insane or horrifying don't really faze me, so from time-to-time I have a hard time differentiating run-of-the-mill crazy from severe psychosis. I also need to check occasionally to make sure that something that I've said was okay, really is. I tend to be too accepting of situations and circumstances.

Like if a good friend of mine asked me to keep a gun for them, I would probably do it simply because it's my friend; why would I question it?

This capacity for trust drives my partner, my husband—we got married in Canada and we wear rings—Sam Kage, absolutely nuts.

But lately, because he was away, I didn't have to worry about explaining myself or my actions. I wanted to, though; I wanted to be interrogated because that way I'd know I was loved. Sam cared enough to grill me, and I missed it.

The man in question had been gone for three months, moving quickly to four, participating in a federal task force. I craved his presence, his touch, his smell on the sheets, his empty coffee cup in the sink, and the towels he left on the floor in the bathroom. I missed being in bed with him, and my

body ached and throbbed with his absence. I had been working off my sexual energy at the gym, and I had been running like a man training for the marathon. I even beat my brother at racquetball, which the stars had to be aligned for me to be able to do. When Dane looked at me with wonder all over his face, I told him I needed Sam to come home so I could get laid. As always, when I over-shared, I got the look of disgust that he could do better than anybody.

I needed to keep busy, so working on the weekend had seemed like a good idea. That was why I had volunteered for a Saturday with Michelle Cooper instead of lying comatose around my loft for two days. Normally, when Sam was home, Saturdays were for sleeping in, hours of sex, and a late breakfast/early lunch. Sam in the morning with his gravel-filled voice, soft eyes, tousled hair, and stubbly beard could stop my heart. His smile when he first opened his smoky-blue eyes, the way they crinkled in half, the curve of his mouth... I couldn't help it. I suddenly had to shift where I was standing on the train because my jeans were tight across the front. I needed to stop thinking about my man.

Fiddling with the platinum band on the ring finger of my left hand, I got off at the Oak Park platform and descended the stairs to the street. I loved it there, even used to live there, and was crazy about the little shops, the great restaurants, and the jewelry store that sold the Baltic Sea amber that my best friend, Dylan Greer, collected. It had stopped pouring, but it was dark and overcast, the street squishy and wet with puddles, the air still smelling like rain. Passing a restaurant, the aroma of syrup hit me, and I had a sudden craving for French toast. I made a mental note to stop for brunch at a restaurant I liked after my walk-through/meeting/consultation.

Three years ago, Aubrey Jenner, then Aubrey Flanagan, Dylan Greer, and I had our own business. But Harvest Design folded in the withering economy, and we were forced to sell and find new jobs. I could not find a job in my field and refused to go back to working for my brother, so I ended up at Synergy.

What I had thought would be an okay job at the time, when I needed something, anything, and I was desperate, I now realized was slowly rotting away my soul.

"Dramatic much?" Dylan had asked me over the phone.

She was still not enjoying her job as an entry-level graphic designer at Tateman Limited, either, but at least she was using her skill set.

"Oh, Jory, you are so using the gifts God gave you," she snapped at me.
"You talk to people better than anyone I know."

I groaned.

"Then quit bitching about it and find a new goddamn job!"

And I needed to, but I could admit to being lazy because the job was effortless and I got paid pretty well.

"Call me later. I wanna go to that store that sells those weird spices, but that guy—"

"Peter."

"Yeah, Peter. He hates me, so you hafta talk to him."

"He likes you, don't be stupid."

"He likes you, Jory," she assured me. "He wants to put his hands all over you. I can see it in that predatory way he looks at you."

"Whatever," I said, patronizing her.

"He does, you just don't see it. You never see it until it's too late."

Whatever that meant. "Fine, I'll call you later."

"Good, go to work."

So I did, and when I called her when I was done, we had gone shopping together. The spice store had been our third stop in Chinatown, and Peter had been his normal, helpful self. I was pretty sure that Dylan was delusional. She always saw more interest in the men around me than I caught myself. I suspected that she was stroking my ego.

But I really did need a new job because working at Synergy, being an assistant to a counselor who assisted a matchmaker, was so not my idea of fun.

At Synergy we did life makeovers; see the propaganda posing as collateral material. We came in, gutted your house, cleaned you up, and found you a partner. It was like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* meets *The Millionaire Matchmaker*, except there were no cameras and it took about a month from start to finish and had what they called check-ins or follow-ups, afterward.

I went first with a counselor and met the client, documented the horror of his or her life, and reported back to our matchmaker. There were five teams at Synergy, each headed up by a matchmaker. I worked for Michelle Cooper, one of six counselors who reported to Becker Rowe, our matchmaker, and finally to Blake Somersby, our managing director.

Reaching the house after eleven, I looked toward the front door and immediately saw Michelle and the rest of the team. Even if I had not been looking for her, there was no way to miss her. She was a knockout with her short-cropped blonde curls and green eyes looking at me like I was the Second Coming. She was crisp and polished in her Stella McCartney suit and gave the impression of cool poise even as she crooked her finger at me. My grin was huge as I walked toward her, my courier bag bumping against my hip as I moved fast to reach her.

"I could pass out right now with you being on time and all," she said, laughing at me as I closed in on her.

"For you, I'll be on time," I said, returning her smile. "For Keith, I dunno."

She nodded. "He does not like to work with you."

"He's a nozzle," I told her, looking around at the others. "Am I right?"

"He's right," Lily Chow agreed with me loudly, while others grunted their agreement.

"See?"

"Jory!" She tried not to laugh. "He's a peer of mine."

"Like I care. He doesn't want to work with me anymore anyway."

"Yes, I know, only Gina and I like you."

I opened my mouth to tell her that I didn't give a crap, again, but she silenced me with her hand. "Fine," I said, "but how come your husband's lettin' you work on the weekend? I thought you guys had a rule or something?"

"He has a big case." She made a face. "He can't even take a break today and have dinner with me, so I was flying solo anyway."

"Oh good, then you can eat with me after," I said, joining her and the others on the porch.

"I would love to do that, Mr. Harcourt." She smiled at me.

"Good, it's a date," I said, reaching out to fix her crumpled collar, smoothing it back into place before smiling at the other four members of her team.

"Hey."

I looked back at her.

"What's wrong?"

I shrugged.

"Jory?"

"Nothing," I lied.

She took hold of my arm and led me a couple feet away. "You hate this."

"I don't hate it," I said as I fiddled with the silver chain around my neck. Sam had given me a Saint Jude medallion a couple years ago, and since he was the patron saint of policemen, I wore it to make sure he, the saint, knew I was paying attention. I wanted him looking after my man.

"Yeah, you do."

"It's fine, I promise."

"J, event-coordinating is not my favorite part of the gig, either, but it's a job, right? I mean, I don't know about you, but I need the money."

But she didn't, not really. Her husband was a software engineer at a very high-profile firm downtown. I was the one who needed the job.

"Okay?"

"Okay," I assured her. "Now, c'mon, let's go in and see the travesty that the man and the house is."

"Oh, I know," she said, awe infusing her voice, "I can't wait to get in there."

"Really?"

"Jory, are you kidding? Look at this house. It must be amazing inside."

I thought the outside looked a little rundown and crappy.

"Look at the stained glass and all the natural woodwork and—"

But she had to stop when the door opened and we were faced with a blond-haired, blue-eyed man looking at us quizzically, if not downright annoyed.

He was taller than me, but most men were. At five-nine, I was nowhere near big. But the stranger at the door was lean and muscular—not *big* muscular like Sam was, but few men were. The stranger’s frame was carved and strong, obvious since the T-shirt he was wearing was hugging his toned chest and torso like a second skin.

It occurred to me that he looked like he belonged on skis in the Alps, wearing a parka, his first name Siegfried. I had the urge to yodel, but stifled it, instead turning my head to Michelle, as always deferring to the salesperson, as well as the woman, in our midst.

"Good afternoon." Michelle smiled huge, giving the man the benefit of gleaming eyes, rows of perfect white, even teeth, and lips that curved in the corner into a gorgeous smile. She was adorable.

"Good morning." He smiled back, taking hold of the hand she offered him.

"I'm Michelle Cooper from Synergy, and this is Jory Harcourt."

"Pleasure to meet you both," he said, smiling at me as well, grasping my hand tight.

"And you," I assured him. "Are you ready to have us take over your life?"

"If I say sort of, will you hold it against me?"

I forced a smile before he looked back over at Michelle. After she introduced the rest of her team, he invited everyone in, moving out of the way so we could enter.

Inside, Michelle immediately started talking about the positives Mr. Fisher would experience from his partnership with us. We could assure him that... blah-blah-blah.... I ducked around the corner before I fell asleep on my feet. The sales spiels killed me, as did our boss Blake Somersby’s morning kick-off meetings, which was why I made sure to miss them on a daily basis. I sent others in my place instead, and Blake had told me on a number of occasions, when he found me in the halls later, that I was missed. I had

asked him if he wanted me snoring in front of everyone. He had glowered at me, but as of yet had not insisted on my presence.

Inside the house, I was astounded at the complete and utter waste of space that it was. Mr. Fisher could do anything with his home and had instead chosen to do absolutely nothing. It could be a refuge, a palace, a sanctuary, and instead it was a frat house. It was so much more horrible than I could have ever imagined, down to the choice of music that was playing.

Thankful that I had my iPod, I put in my earbuds and got out my digital camera to record the horror that was the man's home. I was singing silently along with Eric Clapton, sunglasses up on top of my head, where I had shoved them when we walked in the house, when Michelle and our client joined me a half an hour later.

Hayes Fisher was smiling wide.

"What?" I asked, removing the left earbud.

"You've got a rock 'n' roll heart?"

I grinned big. "Yep, how'dya know?"

He nodded. "I love Eric Clapton. Why don't I have that album?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. As far as I can tell, you don't have any good music."

Michelle groaned.

"I'm sorry?" Mr. Fisher's face fell as he scowled at me.

That fast I had annoyed him. It really was a gift. I glanced over at Michelle. "I don't normally talk to clients for this very reason."

She chuckled as I left the room to take more pictures.

I wasn't charming, I tended to be blunt, and I had always felt that clients needed to know the truth about things. I had learned it when I worked for my brother Dane years ago. Dane just spoke his mind, and so I did too. It

was a bad habit, though, as I was not the architectural god that he was. Dylan always told me that there were ways to tell people things. Honesty was sometimes not the best policy. I needed to learn finesse. I told her that if I didn't already have it, that it probably wasn't going to happen. I was thirty, for crissakes.

"Mr. Harcourt!"

I looked over my shoulder at the sound of my name.

"Are you listening to me?"

Of course not.

"Could you just... could you take those out of your ears so I can talk to you?"

I conceded to one earbud. I left the right one in. "Yeah?"

"Yeah?" He repeated the word irritably.

"Oh, yes?" Dane hated "yeah" too. My brother said that "yeah" was a plague on mankind, sloppy and overused. And he didn't think he was uptight.

"What?"

"What can I do for you?" Now I was annoyed.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm detailing the horror," I said like it was obvious, adding some snark to my voice for good measure.

"Pardon me?"

I gestured around.

"Do you have something to—"

Michelle tried to break into the conversation. "Mr. Fisher, I think—"

"Mr. Harcourt, you—"

"I'm busy," I said, jiggling my digital camera so he could see it.

"I'm just taking pictures so the design team can know what they're up against."

"Up against?"

"Well, yeah."

"In what way?"

I gestured around so he'd realize I meant everything.

"You have a problem with my home?"

Michelle chuckled hollowly. "No, he—"

"Yeah," I told him, "I have a problem. It looks like a frat house in here except it's clean. No empty beer bottles in sight."

"Pardon me?"

"It's incredible what you haven't done."

"What?"

"What?" I was confused. I was speaking English, I was just sure of it.

Dark scowl, brows furrowing as he looked at me.

"Take that, for instance," I said, pointing.

"It's a beanbag chair," he said defensively, rubbing the top of his head. "My friend's kids love it."

"Do they?"

"Yes."

"Well, good. Can you give it to them?"

"What?"

"Jory," Michelle began, "perhaps Mr. Fisher would like us to create a rec room for the—"

"Just tell us where to send it. I'll have a courier over here to pick it up today."

"Mr. Harcourt, you—"

"Christ." I was in awe, surveying the nightmare. "It's a mess in here."

"Could you—"

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Caught off guard, he gulped air and just nodded.

"Do you bring dates here?"

"I, what? Yes." His voice dropped off as he cleared his throat.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"I will."

"You will or you won't? You don't sound too certain."

"What? Yes, of course."

"Okay." I smirked at him, widening my eyes, making sure he knew I thought he was nuts. "As long as you're sure."

He turned to face Michelle. "Mrs. Cooper, your partner—"

"Mr. Fisher, I—"

I turned my iPod back up so I missed whatever they said to each other as I took in the details: the cinder block and plywood bookshelves, the milk crates holding his movie collection, the plastic lamp hanging in the living room, the gilded chain that hung from it, down back over the shade, falling to the middle of the floor, where it was then plugged into an orange utility extension cord that was in turn plugged into the far wall. It was beyond hideous. And then there was the spider plant in the corner.

The only other place I had seen a macramé plant hanger before was in pictures of Sam's parents' house from the seventies. I think there was a shot of his mother sitting beside one in the living room. I pulled out my phone and took a picture of just the hanger and then one of me and the plant hanger together; I was doing my best Vanna

White impression, and I e-mailed it to the project manager, Wade Fujihara. I got a quick text back and chuckled when I saw it. He was very confused about where I was or more precisely, in what *time* I was. I had taken the *way-back* machine to work, he was just certain.

"Jory!"

Realizing that she had been yelling, I took out my earbuds and looked at Michelle. She was right behind me, apparently had been for several minutes, and Hayes Fisher was standing next to her. "Yes?"

"Mr. Harcourt," Mr. Fisher began sharply. "I—"

"You just moved back here right?"

"I'm—what?"

"I read that in the profile. You used to live in New York, but you're originally from here, from Chicago, and you moved back after a horrible divorce 'cause your family's here, right?"

"Yes, I—"

"So most of the crap in here is from the previous owner."

"No, I—"

"You didn't make them clean up, you just moved in, right?"

"No, this is all my—"

"Oh," I said, drawing out the word. "Wow, so much for the benefit of the doubt, huh?"

"Mr. Harcourt!"

"Is this about the house or are we just chit-chatting?"

"You—"

"Sorry, you obviously have something to add," I sighed, even as my mind drifted. It was why I had stopped going to church when I got old enough to decide for myself. I had informed my grandmother that I always felt bad because I would be thinking about chocolate chip cookies or something when I was supposed to be thinking about God.

"Do you have any idea how obnox—"

"You know what the coolest thing about driving is?" I asked, giving up for the moment on keeping myself on task.

"What? No, I do—"

"Do you want to know?"

"I—"

"Do you?"

"Mr.—"

"Do you?"

He took a breath, threw up his hands, and gestured for me to go ahead.

"Okay, so the coolest thing about driving is that if you make an ass of yourself at one light—stall out, roll too far into the intersection, miss the turn light until somebody honks at you—whatever, I mean it doesn't matter 'cause by the time you get to the next light you're with a whole new group of drivers that don't know you from Adam.

You're new. You're just another asshole in a car that's drivin' along just like them. I love that. It's like a do-over at each red light."

He was just staring at me.

"Cool, right?" I waggled my eyebrows at him.

His eyes, which were really a lovely shade of sky blue, were fixed on mine.

"So let's have a do-over. I'm sorry for insulting your complete lack of interest in your own home, and you will forgive my blunt analysis of your colossal failure. How'd that be?"

His mouth was open, but nothing came out.

I looked over at Michelle. "I tried."

She was just staring at me.

Gina Bailey, the only other counselor in the group I was in, knew better than to let me talk to clients. Michelle, apparently, had not gotten the memo. And I had tried to make myself scarce. It wasn't my fault that the man was following me around.

I had to try and fix it. "Lemme ask you a serious question," I said, rounding on Hayes Fisher. "Do you or do you not want somebody special in your life?"

"What?"

"Isn't the point of all this for you to show off to everyone that you're a catch?"

"The point of this is to—"

"It's to find someone to marry, right? I mean, instead of going out and dating and doing the hard work yourself, you're going through us, through a service, and we're gonna throw a huge party where you'll have a chance to show off your new digs and your money and where there will be several available women who are ready to settle down and become wives and mothers. Am I right?"

He was at a loss, that much was obvious.

"So suck up your pride about me telling you that this place looks like crap, which it does, by the way, and let us do our jobs without the hassle of listening to you moan and groan about how the crack den here ain't so bad."

"I'm sorry?"

I let my voice drop low. "Oh, you should be."

"Crack den?"

I shrugged. "It's gross."

"I—"

"Are we all gonna get along? Yes or no 'cause I don't wanna send Wade out here if you're gonna give him crap. He's sensitive."

"He's sens—"

"And a pompous ass, but that will work to your benefit because all he'll want is what's best for you."

He stood there, staring at me.

"So," I asked him, "are you in or are you out?"

"I... Mr. Har—"

"Jory," I corrected him, reaching out to give him a hard pat on the arm. "It's just Jory."

"You—"

"In or out?" I asked again, pressing for an answer.

He stared at me for several minutes before he finally said, "In."

"Great," I said, gesturing behind him to Michelle, who was beaming at me.

He looked over his shoulder at her, and I went to move, but before I could, he was barring my path, sliding in front of me.

"Something else?"

"It's just a bachelor pad. They all look the same."

"No," I assured him, stepping around him.

He was back in front of me fast, so fast, in fact, that I had to freeze mid-step or walk into him.

"What bachelors do you know?"

"Ones with better decorators," I said, smiling at him.

"I—"

"Yeah," I said, glancing around, "this is a travesty."

"Mr. Har—"

"Jory," I corrected again, walking away from him, which cut him off. I was surprised when he followed me again.

"Can you stop walking?"

"I'm working, Mr. Fisher," I informed him, smiling at Michelle, who looked pained again. "I don't get paid to just chit-chat all day."

"What are you—"

"Huh," I grunted as my eyes flew all over the room.

"Can you quit with that?"

"Sure," I said distractedly, looking at all the empty walls, the space. "Jesus."

He looked at me, scowling. "What would you do differently?"

"There's just so much you could do."

"Like what?"

"Like everything that Wade and his team suggest," I assured him. "Just be open to it."

He was speechless as I turned away, squinting at the walls.

"Wait."

I looked back at him.

"You—"

"Hold that thought." I smiled quickly, leaving his bedroom, wrinkling my nose like something smelled.

"What?"

"Amazing," I said absently, taking in for the second time now the giant spool being used as a coffee table. I'd thought maybe the first time I was just seeing things. But it was there, big as life, smack dab in the middle of his living room. "Who knew you could still even get one of those."

"I—"

"I need a picture," I said, snapping the photo, framing it so Wade could see all the wasted space in the room. "Wade's gonna pull something from laughing."

"Mr. Har—"

"Jory," I reminded him for what felt like the tenth time, leaving him alone so I could check one of the four unused bedrooms. It was full of sports equipment and athletic shoes. It smelled like wet dog.

The second bedroom was the one for guests. If you were a parolee, you would feel right at home. Stark was an understatement.

The third bedroom was being used as an office, and in his room there were mirrors on the closet doors that didn't fit and were cut in sort of squiggle shapes. I could not articulate my disgust. I took a picture for Wade, and the word "travesty" was texted back. I grunted my agreement.

I went to the kitchen, pulled out my laptop, and started uploading all the pictures I had taken. I sent them all to Wade and got a call back in five minutes. It was a new record.

"Hello, devil," he greeted me, "I didn't know they had reception in hell."

I chuckled at the cool, cultured voice giving me sarcasm. "Oh, but they do."

"Seriously," he said, coughing, "I thought you were screwing with me with the plant hanger, trying to get me to laugh because I'm stuck here working on Saturday instead of antique shopping with my man, but now I gotta ask... am I actually looking at a beanbag chair?"

"You're fulla shit. Antique shopping, my ass. Whaddya really shop for?"

Beats of silence went by.

"Wade."

"So I'm in the market for a motorcycle, so what?"

I chuckled.

"Don't tell anyone. All I'll hear about is a fuckin' midlife crisis that I'm not having."

"Okay," I assured him. "Not a word."

He grunted. "Now, seriously... is that really a beanbag chair?"

"His friends' kids like it," I said cheerfully.

"Super, let's get something cool for them like a trampoline with netting for the backyard. The kids will love it, and it won't be an eyesore in the man's house. God, it's lime green too."

"It's the least of his problems."

"Oh, amen," he agreed wholeheartedly.

"Me and Michelle should be there around one."

"I'll have a martini waiting."

I was laughing when I hung up, turning off my camera.

"You don't have to plug it in?"

I turned to look at my client, who I hadn't realized was there.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your camera?"

"No, it's Bluetooth," I told him, "and I've got wireless, so the horror has been documented and sent on to frighten colleagues of mine."

"Just—"

"You know," I said, looking at him as I stuffed my laptop and camera back in my courier bag, giving him an indulgent smile, "it's so much worse than I ever imagined possible, Mr. Fisher. Really, it's like a bad porno set in here."

"I will give you that it's a little bare, but—"

My groan cut him off. "This place so needs a makeover. It's a wonder you're not suicidal."

He swore under his breath.

"And it's lucky you don't have kids yet 'cause all the open space would be creepy at night."

"What are you—"

"It must be scary as hell in here in the dark. When I was little, we just had a trailer, but even then when I woke up in the night, I used to pretend I was Frankenstein, ya know? I'd walk to the bathroom moaning, making the growling sort of noise he makes, doing his walk with my arms out 'cause I figured if the other monsters thought I was a monster, then they wouldn't try and get me."

He was staring at me, openmouthed.

"What?"

"You just... you...."

I smiled wide. "Back to the house, Mr. Fisher, I promise when we're done, with the budget you've given us and the free rein over design, it will be stunning, okay?"

He was still looking at me weird.

"Mr. Fisher?"

"Is it really so horrible now?" he asked, flopping down onto one of his kitchen chairs. It creaked under his weight.

I looked at him and pointed. "That'll hafta go too."

"Christ," he muttered.

I had to laugh.

His scowl deepened. "So what are you gonna do?" he asked me, his voice pained.

"Not me. Like I told you, the interior design team. That's a whole separate entity."

He looked up at me, and I wasn't sure what I saw there.

"Mr. Fisher, I swear to God you don't have to see me again until your big night."

"Mr. Harcourt, you—"

"Okay," I announced, "well, I gotta go because I'm starving, but another team will be in touch to go over timelines with you, and invitations and the

list of who you want and who you don't." I offered him my hand.

He looked dazed, but he took my hand, and we shook.

I moved away from him, walking over to Michelle.

"I remember now," she said, grinning at me, "you maul people into submission."

"That's right." I winked at her, grabbing her hand and tugging her after me.

"Jory," she said, laughing, "I have to say good-bye to the man."

"Fine," I grumbled, letting her go. "I'll meet you at the restaurant. I'll go get a table."

"Wait."

"What?"

"I don't know where I'm going."

I squinted at her. "For French Toast, of course."

"How was I supposed to know that? And please tell me where we're going?"

I was used to traveling with Dylan. My best friend never missed a beat of what was going on in my head. I had to stop expecting it of others. I gave her the name of the place and told her where it was.

"Okay," she said, smiling at me, the adoration there in her eyes.

"I'll meet you there."

"Are you bringin' the whole team?"

"No, doll, it's just you and me."

"Good," I said, even though I liked the rest of the team. I just wasn't up to making conversation with the whole group.

Halfway to the door, I turned around. "Everything's gonna be all right, Mr. Fisher," I assured him. "Michelle will plan the gala with you, Wade Fujihara will be here on Monday morning to go over the plans for renovating your space, and then someone else will be by with photos of the women interested in becoming your missus."

He just stared at me, mouth open.

"Maybe if you play your cards right, then the night of the party you could get your date to stay over 'cause you really look like you need to get—"

"Jory!"

"What?"

Her expression was priceless.

"I thought clients wanted to be talked to like regular people?"

"No."

"No?"

"Jory!"

Crap.

"Go to the restaurant, already. I'll be there right behind you."

She wanted me out. I didn't need to be told twice.

I was scaling the front steps back down to the sidewalk when my name was called. Turning, I looked back up to the front door to find Hayes Fisher standing there, looking down at me.

"Yeah?" I called out.

He shook his head. "What kind of manners are those, not even offering your client lunch?"

"You mean brunch," I corrected him.

"You're kind of an ass, Mr. Har—Jory."

"Kind of?" I teased him.

"Why don't we all have brunch with you?"

"Why?" I asked, going back up the stairs I'd just come down.

"Why not?" he asked as I stepped in front of him.

That kind of logic always worked on me. "Okay, sure," I said with a shrug.

"Hayes?"

We both turned to look at the scary-looking woman who had stepped out onto the porch beside him. I had never seen a scowl quite that dark—except for Sam's.

"This is my assistant, Lisa, who Mrs. Cooper already met," he said, smirking at me. "Lisa, this is Jory Harcourt."

Her brows furrowed. I widened my eyes and gave her my big smile, the one that made even my brother, even when he was furious with me, stop yelling and listen. For a second I thought maybe she was going to hold onto the whole prison-guard vibe she had going and not thaw, but then, suddenly, her eyes softened, and she melted.

"It's a pleasure," she sighed, offering me her hand.

"And you," I lowered my voice, making it deep, seductive as I took her hand and then covered it with my other.

"Oh," Michelle breathed out as she too joined us.

Mr. Fisher's mouth moved like he was going to speak, but instead he ended up just staring at me. I arched an eyebrow for him.

"So are we going?"

"Yeah, um... Lisa cleared my schedule, and so I thought I would invite myself along to breakfast, er, brunch. I wanted to talk more to Mrs. Cooper, and we're all hungry."

"Michelle," she corrected him.

"Michelle," he repeated.

"Sure," I agreed, drawing Lisa forward, tucking her hand under my arm. "Your assistant should come too," I said, looking down into the girl's big blue eyes. "Us support staff hafta stick together."

She nodded, taking hold of my arm as we started down the front steps. I heard Michelle growl behind me.

CHAPTER
TWO

Chapter Two

THE place I wanted to go to was packed when we got there, so we were stuck waiting, sitting by the door where the draft was. Hayes suggested we try someplace else, but Michelle said that it wasn't possible once I got something stuck in my head.

"It's true," I said, nodding. "I mean, if I don't get it now, I'll just want it, and so I'll eat more stuff to try and fill the void of something I want with something I don't, and we all know what that leads to."

"No, what?"

"Overeating," Lisa told him like he was stupid. "If you have what you want, then you're sated and eat only that. If you don't, you just eat and eat and eat until you finally just go back to what you really wanted and have that, but meanwhile you've stuffed your face with every other thing that looked decent."

Michelle grunted her agreement.

He threw up his hands as my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Is this Jory?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"This is Eddie Liron, from last night."

"Oh, hey." I smiled into the phone. "How are you?"

"I'm better'n Josh Peretti, that's for sure," he snickered.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't see the paper this morning, huh?"

"No, why?"

"I guess Josh took that dive off his balcony that you saved me from."

I was stunned. "Holy shit."

"I know, right? What are the odds?"

I had a pretty good idea. "Your brother was mad that you were threatened at Peretti's place. He expected you to be safe there, and then you weren't. He had to have been pissed."

"He was."

Older brothers got that way. They were protective. Not normally homicidally protective, but the point had been made. Perhaps I was jumping to conclusions, though. I had never even met Eddie's brother.

"Hey, so I was calling to invite you over to my brother's place tonight. He wants to meet you and thank you for saving my ass."

"Oh, that's not really—"

"Yeah, it is. You saved my life."

"I didn't really do—"

"Yeah, ya did. Come on, I wanna see ya, so show up, all right? I want my brother to see that not all my pals are losers."

I had to smile—since when were we friends?

"Okay, sure."

"I'll text you directions, okay?"

I agreed, and when I hung up, I asked Michelle if Joshua Peretti was really dead.

She scowled at me. "Who?"

"Yes," Lisa answered me, pointing.

Turning, I saw the stack of newspapers for sale beside the cash register. As I moved closer, I saw the headline and when I could, briefly scanned the article. Joshua Peretti had been drunk the night before and fallen from his penthouse. It was a horrible accident, and he would be missed by his family and friends and many colleagues.

As a top philanthropist, his many civic improvements would be remembered.

"Holy shit," I breathed out.

"Since when do you know Joshua Peretti?" Michelle asked suspiciously.

I knew the grin I gave her must have looked guilty from her immediate scowl.

"Jory?"

"I was working the Dunbar event last night with Harris, and when it was done, the two of us were invited upstairs to an after-party."

"But you know we're not supposed to mix with cli—"

"Yeah I know, but Jeff was going, and I didn't want him to go alone."

She pointed at me. "You—"

"Do you wanna hear the story or not?"

She growled at me.

I smiled back. There was nothing like a good story.

TRUTHFULLY, I had just wanted to see the view of Lake Michigan from the thirty-fifth floor. Even my brother, the high-profile architect, did not have a place that Paris Hilton would have been at home in.

I was surprised that my coworker, down-to-earth Jeffrey Harris, would want to go and mingle with people who sipped Cristal out of Baccarat goblets, did lines of cocaine in the living room, and danced the night away so far above the city, but he did. And when I looked around a half an hour after we got there and he was gone, that had surprised me as well. Who knew the man was going to forget about his wingman so quickly?

Stepping out onto the balcony, I heard the yell immediately. It was just one of those things. It was not cold like it was in January, but March in Chicago was still blustery, still rainy. One year it had actually snowed right before Easter, so really there was no reason to go out on the balcony. But I liked lights, all shiny, sparkly things, actually, fairly certain that I had been a crow in my former life, so the gleaming skyline had beckoned and I answered the siren call. I was the only one out there. Me and the five other guys.

From the living room, there was no way to see them. It was necessary to walk out onto the balcony and turn a corner to see the four men holding the fifth over the railing.

"I guess you won't see your brother to tell him, Eddie."

It was done. He was falling if I didn't do....

"Eddie, goddamnit!" I yelled.

Four heads turned to me. Eddie himself just screamed.

I took three steps back, closer to the door, still too far to make it if someone had a gun, but my odds were better. At thirty, which I had just turned in January, I was in the best shape of my life. I would match my sprint with that of most people.

"Who the fuck are you?" the first guy yelled.

I pointed at Eddie. "That asshole gave my sister the clap!"

It was all I could think of. I didn't want to say he gave me the clap because that would have opened up a whole other can of worms.

I blurted, as usual, and I was betting that of all the things I could have said, that was the one no one saw coming. The looks on their faces said as much.

"I need to talk to that fucker now!"

"You need to get the hell out of—"

"Now!" I yelled, before whirling around and stalking back over to the sliding glass door. "I am so fuckin' pissed! You better drag his lame ass in here!"

My hand was on the door handle when I was grabbed from behind and yanked back around to face the man who had yelled at me.

"What?" I barked at him, rolling my shoulder so he had to let go of me or make it obvious that he was holding me.

"Calm down," he said, his voice low and ominous as the other three men pushed Eddie at me, shoving him so hard that I had to get both hands on him to keep him from plowing into the door. "Here's lover boy."

They swarmed around us with vulgar and vivid comments about what a whore my fictitious sister was. I warned them all to shut their fucking mouths as they bumped Eddie with their shoulders as they walked by.

"Don't look so scared, kid, we weren't actually gonna do nothin'. If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. No pissed-off big brother of some slut you banged changes that."

"Fuck you!" I yelled at the guy's retreating back to drill my point home.

"Your sister's a whore," he snarled back, but didn't turn around.

The door opened and closed, and the last guy said that if Eddie was smart Cristo would never know about what just happened.

I watched the men go, and when the door slid closed, I turned immediately to Eddie.

"Who are you?" he breathed out.

"You know you gotta tell your brother, like, now, right?"

Honesty is always the best way to go, and having an older brother myself, I know they get all weird if you lie."

His eyes absorbed my face. "Jesus Christ, man, you ain't out here and I'm kissin' pavement right fuckin' now."

"Potentially." I smiled at him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him inside after me. "Where are the people you came with?"

He didn't answer, just stared at me hard.

"Are you okay?"

The shivering came fast, and I grabbed him, hugging him tight, tucking his head down into my shoulder. It was only then, when he moved suddenly,

twisted so I was the one slammed against his chest that I understood that he was bigger than me.

"It's okay," I said gently, molding my body to his, pressing close, so he could feel how warm and alive I was.

"You... saved my life."

"It's okay."

I could feel his hand fisted in the back of my hair, the other braced against my back. He was not letting go.

"Give it a second."

"Eddie?"

We both turned to the man in the suit standing beside us. It was a nice bit of tailoring, designer-label wool suit that had been custom- made to fit broad shoulders and a wide chest. I was betting it cost as much as my mortgage payment.

"You ready to go, kid?"

"Where were you?" he gasped, leaning out of my arms, but immediately taking hold of the back of my leather racing jacket.

"I was here," the man answered, his eyes darting between me and Eddie.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "I don't think so."

"C'mon, kid, whatever happened—"

"I was almost killed, you son of a bitch!" he roared at the man, who, even though he was bigger, took a step back. "And now I dunno what the fuck to do."

He was scared and panicky and ready to start hyperventilating at any minute. I knew the signs. I had, in the past, had similar reactions.

"Excuse me," I said to the man. "Eddie's brother."

"What about him."

"Could you call him and tell him to meet him here."

"Why would I do that? The man doesn't like to be disturbed."

"He's gonna wanna know what just happened to his baby brother."

"What happened?" he asked warily.

I explained fast, and he nodded, his heavy hand dropping down onto my shoulder as he listened to my halting explanation.

"Who are you?"

"Jory Harcourt." I smiled at him, watching him calm, shoulders going first, dropping, the release of breath, and then the stance relaxing. I could do that sometimes when I tried, soothe people. My brother said it was a gift; Sam assured me it was misery waiting to happen.

"How do you know Eddie?" he asked at the same time he dialed and put his ear to the phone, half his attention on me, the rest on listening.

"We go to the same gym," I lied smoothly.

He nodded, hand tightening as he looked away from me. "Cris, it's Paz. I'm gonna bring Eddie by your place. We had some trouble at Peretti's."

I watched him, saw his jaw tighten, observed the worry slide over him, creasing the space between his eyebrows into a scowl.

Whatever the man on the other end of the line had said was not good.

"Trouble!" Eddie yelled suddenly, snatching the phone away from the man, his guardian, and yelling into it. "Cris, Miller's men nearly put me on the fuckin' pavement! If it wasn't for my buddy, Jor—No! I was only talking to Nina at Duvall's, and she—"

"Gimme the goddamn phone," the bigger man growled, snatching it back as I took a step away.

I wanted to go, I needed to go. I had that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that everything was going to go really bad really fast. I needed to inject some normal into the situation from somewhere.

Eddie grabbed at his bodyguard's phone, and I took that moment to turn and step left and then right. Seconds later I was absorbed by the crowd, across the room and closing in on the front door. I scanned the room fast, looking for Harris, one last glance so I could say I checked, and then bolted for the door. I had a very strongly developed sense of danger, and at that moment it felt as though there was a red light going off over my head.

Outside in the hall, I took a breath.

"Jory."

Turning, I found Eddie.

"Where are you going?"

We both heard the yell at the same time, saw the men spilling out of the elevator. We both saw the blue windbreakers with the big yellow word POLICE in bold letters. I grabbed his arm, yanked him forward, and started down the hall. At the door that led to the stairs, I hit the panic bar and it swung open. He took a step to go down, but I knew about these things and yanked him back, tugging him after me to go up. As we were almost through the door on the floor above us, we heard people coming up the stairwell. Eddie looked down over the railing, but I shoved him forward, opening the door to push him through.

"What the fuck was all that?"

"I have no idea," I said as I rounded on him. "Who the hell are you guys?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but stopped, squinting, and then shrugged.

"I saved you," I told him, "twice. You owe me an explanation."

Heavy sigh as he shoved his hands down in the pockets of his dress pants.

"Okay, so I'm Eddie Liron, and Cristo Liron, he's my brother."

I just waited.

"You never heard of Cristo Liron?"

I shrugged.

"Okay, so we have a construction business, well, my brother has a construction business, and he's already in business with Peretti—that's his place downstairs—and Adrian Miller."

I had no idea who any of those people were. "What does any of that have to do with the police raid downstairs?"

"They may think that Peretti and Miller and my brother are running guns and drugs."

"Are they?" I asked him.

He winced.

"Are they?" I pressed him.

"Maybe."

"Crap," I groaned.

He gave me a hard two-fingered poke in the collarbone. "You tell anybody I said that and you're dead, you hear me?"

I arched an eyebrow for him.

"Sorry," he deflated, and I realized how young he was.

"Who the hell am I gonna tell?"

He shrugged before looking up and down the hall. "So now what?"

"Now we go down the elevator to the first floor and walk out."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, why would anybody want you?"

"I dunno."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two, why?"

I groaned and headed for the elevator. He fell into step beside me, matching my quick stride, his hand finding its way to my shoulder.

"I'm thinking Peretti and Miller are screwed."

"Maybe," I agreed as we got in the elevator. "But it's lucky your brother wasn't there."

He nodded quickly. "Yeah, that is lucky."

On the street five minutes later, we got in separate cabs after he hugged me so hard I thought my ribs were going to crack. I was glad to be headed home. It had been a really weird night.

"JORY."

I looked at Michelle, who had gone white as a sheet. "What?"

"Jory, Cristo Liron, Adrian Miller—those are very scary men."

"Yeah?"

"Oh God."

"What?"

Her mouth was hanging open. Lisa looked the same, like a fish, and Hayes Fisher was just staring at me.

"What?"

"You're like a train wreck waiting to claim lives."

I was not.

"You're dangerous."

"Who's dangerous?"

The deep resonant voice, rich, smooth and warm while at the same time sounding crisp and cultured, was clearly amused. Even before I turned around, I knew who I would find.

"Hey." I smiled up at my brother.

As always, his expression as he looked at me was a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

"What have you done now?"

"Me?"

Gray eyes warmed, turning to quicksilver. I looked past him to the men he had with him: his best friend Jude Coughlin, his brother- in-law Alex

Greene, and another good friend, Rick Jenner, my friend Aubrey's husband. They all greeted me warmly, but before Dane could make introductions, Hayes stepped forward.

"Mr. Harcourt," he said, drawing in a deep breath as he offered Dane his hand. "This is a pleasure. The homes you've designed are some of the best I've ever seen."

Dane took the offered hand, giving the man the slightest smile.

"Thank you."

"I actually have an appointment to see you in another three months. I've been on the list for six."

"Only six?" He arched an eyebrow.

Dane Harcourt understood what his time was worth. Modesty did not live in the man. As one of the top architects in the country, he knew that he was a desired commodity. It was a sign that you had arrived if you could afford to hire Dane Harcourt to design your home. The rich and famous wanted him, but only the serious ever saw him. He weeded out the nouveau riche and the frivolous; only connoisseurs of architecture ever got appointments, and even then, you waited. It was a test and only a slight number passed. Those that did considered themselves in a very elite group.

"I'm looking forward to our meeting."

"And now so am I," he said, dropping the man's hand to turn his charcoal eyes on me. "How are you?"

"I'm good, you?"

"Why are you dangerous?" he asked, ignoring my question, coming directly to the point as was his trademark.

"What?" I really didn't want Dane to know.

"Why," he said, enunciating the word, "are you dangerous?"

"Jory was with Joshua Peretti last night before he died."

I turned to look at Michelle.

Her face remained neutral for several seconds before a look of terror slid over it.

"Thanks."

She mouthed the words *oh shit*.

"Pardon me?" Dane cleared his throat, crossing his arms, staring down at me from his own towering height.

At six-five, the man looked down on practically everyone, but that wasn't the reason people stopped to stare at him on the street. It was the way he walked, like he owned the world and you were just visiting, breathing his air. Confidence rolled off him, like he had everything figured out. And it turned out he did. Nothing rattled Dane Harcourt except his wife... and me.

"Jory?"

"Wait." I smiled up at him as he squinted down at me. "It's not what you're thinking."

"No?"

"Okay, lis—"

He grabbed my arm and yanked me sideways, pulling me into the alcove between the door and the bathroom. Looking around, I saw the envious looks cast my way, and not only by women. Hard not to want to be the one Dane Harcourt was manhandling.

It was the jet-black hair and granite eyes with chips of silver in them, the chiseled profile, and the deep resonant sound of his voice that did it. His

height, the broad shoulders and chest, the way his clothes fit like everything was custom made, just the bearing of the man being classic movie star god took your breath away. My brother belonged in magazines, not at a drafting table.

"Joshua Peretti has—had," he corrected himself, "mob connections. Everyone knew that. It was the reason I refused to design for him. What were you doing there?"

I explained about being at a job and then agreeing to be Jeffrey Harris's wingman, and how I had saved Eddie out on the patio. I talked really fast because the way Dane was looking at me, I only had minutes to live.

"You can't go on dates," he told me the second I was done.

Where had he gotten from my explanation that I was on a date?

"No, I... it was business first and then fun and—"

"Jory, you can't be some guy's wingman once you're married.

It's considered—"

"Why not? I'm not the one going on a date?"

His eyes held me pinned there like an insect under a microscope.

"Listen to me. You do not—"

I cut him off. "Who's Adrian Miller? Eddie said his brother and Joshua Peretti and Adrian Miller were all in business together."

I watched the muscles in his jaw clench. "Adrian Miller is a thug. His construction company doesn't just clean up building debris, he cleans up all kinds of things."

"Like what things?"

"Like people things," he snapped at me, his hand suddenly on my shoulder, squeezing. "You are not to go near Eddie Liron or his brother Cristo or Adrian Miller again. Do you understand me? Are we clear?"

I wondered vaguely if he realized that I was a grown-up.

"Dane—"

"Are you listening to me?" he asked, his voice all business.

"How do you really know what kind of business Adrian Miller or—"

"You used to work for me. You know how close my ties are to the construction industry. All the people I work with will not work with Adrian Miller, and neither will you."

"I don't work with him now," I defended myself. "I went with Jeff Harris, who ditched me, by the way, and ended up meeting Eddie Liron. I didn't plan it."

He nodded, his eyes locked on my face. The scrutiny was unnerving.

"What are you doing here?"

"It should be obvious that I'm going to have brunch at one of my favorite restaurants. I might remind you that I'm the one who brought you here the first time."

Oh yeah. "Where's Aja?"

"Don't try and change the subject. I want your word that you're going to stay away from Eddie Liron, his homicidal brother Cristo, and Adrian Miller."

I gave him a long annoyed sigh. "Agreed. I'll tell Eddie that my brother said I can't play with him anymore."

The squint became an all-out scowl.

"Oh for crap's sake, is it ride Jory day? Because if it is, I missed the memo."

"Let's eat," he ordered, walking away from me so I had no choice but to follow.

I threw up my hands in defeat.

"Do what I say," he warned me as we rejoined the others.

He didn't even have to turn around to know that I was disgusted with him.

"Introduce me," he commanded.

So I introduced Dane to Michelle and Lisa and watched them both. Michelle took a breath and remained cool, but Lisa.... I watched the woman puddle to the floor right there. She looked up and up, her head tilted all the way back so she could look into Dane Harcourt's face. When he smiled, she, like everyone else, saw the flecks of mercury in his eyes. The shiver was adorable, her indrawn breath expected. But he wasn't in the mood to be charming, he didn't offer her his arm to lead her to the table; he grabbed me instead, shoving me ahead of him, pointing toward the back where I only ever sat when I dined with him.

I did not tell Dane about agreeing to see Eddie Liron again. I didn't bring up that I was going to be introduced to his brother. Even when I felt my phone vibrate with the text message, I kept it to myself.

CHAPTER
THREE

Chapter Three

A\Z

I REALLY needed to stop having preconceived ideas about things.

From the party at the place I had been at the night before, I thought I would be going to another big fancy penthouse with a panoramic view of the city. What I got was a house in Highland Park, which was an enormous Renaissance Revival mansion. I had worked for an architect for five years; I knew what I was looking at. If the number of cars in the driveway was any indication, the party was more of a small gathering. When I knocked on the front door, Eddie answered.

"Hey," he said, smiling at me. "You made it!"

I took the hand he offered me, letting him pull me into the beautiful house. The marble floors, the halls that were so wide you could drive a car down them, the carved, polished wood—it was like being in a museum. And that made sense since Renaissance Revival was usually only seen in public buildings or homes of the very rich.

He was about to take my army-style jacket when another man came jogging up and said that plans had changed and everyone was heading out to a party.

"We can do this another time, then," I told Eddie, taking a step back toward the door.

"Oh, look," the same bodyguard from the night before said, smiling as he greeted me. I noticed the diamond in his right front tooth. "It's the guardian angel."

"Hey." I beamed at him, extending my hand. "How're you,

Paz?"

He squinted at me. "Did I tell you my name?"

"No, but I heard you say it in the phone."

He nodded and smiled at me, taking my hand hard, yanking me forward so he could give me the guy clench.

After he had mauled me, he let me go, and when I stood back, there was another man there as well. He leaned forward, offering me his hand.

"I'm Adan." He smiled at me as we shook hands. "Nice job takin' care of our boy last night. We appreciate it."

"No problem." I nodded, shoving my hands down in my pockets.

"So Cristo wants to see you, angel, and talk to you a little bit, all right? So you come along with us. We're headed back downtown. We got a meeting on a yacht."

"We could just reschedule."

Paz shook his head. "No need to do that. Just follow us, all right?"

"I'll ride with Jory," Eddie offered.

"Eddie."

We all turned to the voice and saw a man coming down the hall toward us. He moved forward until I had to tilt my head back to keep his gaze. I felt his breath feather over my face when he exhaled.

"You're the guardian angel, right?"

I shook my head. "You're making too big a deal out of—"

He cut me off. "I'm Cristo Liron."

"Pleasure to meet you." I smiled up at him, shifting my weight to take a step back, offering him my hand. "I'm Jory Harcourt."

His hand came up, and he wrapped his fingers around my throat gently, stilling my motion. It was fast, too fast, the way he just stepped into my personal space. "I'm supposed to do some business, and then the rest of the night is mine," he said, studying my face, looking me over, sizing me up. "My plan was to meet friends, have some drinks, and then have dinner. Would you join me?"

"I'm actually a little partied out." I smiled at him, lifting my chin so his hand had to drop off of me. "But maybe—"

"Please." He stepped forward again but didn't try and touch me a second time. "I have to go to this meeting, but I really want to talk to you."

I looked at him, and he turned and looked at his brother. "Would you excuse us, Eddie?" he said quickly and then tipped his head at Adan and Paz. It was just us in his entryway moments later, and I realized what a huge space it was.

"Listen," he sighed, taking a step closer so I was back to looking up at him. "I was in my den, and I saw you drive up and get out of your car. I had no idea who you were, but I wanted to come down here and talk to whoever you were once I got a look at you."

I waited for what came next.

"So," he said, clearing his throat, "my cards are on the table.

Will you have dinner with me?"

I cleared my throat, taking another step back. "I have a partner, Mr. Liron, and he—"

"Cristo," he corrected me, moving closer again, his right hand going on the wall beside him, leaning on it, closer to me. "Now, tell me about your partner."

I took another step back, but he moved with me, again allowing no distance. He wasn't touching me, but he was crowding me.

"This partner of yours, where is he?"

"He's away on business."

He nodded. "I see. And he's been away awhile?"

I had no reason to lie. "Yes."

"You're certain he's returning?"

"We live together, and he's coming back," I assured him with more conviction than I felt. It wasn't that Sam wouldn't want to return, given the choice, but at the moment I had no idea where he was or how he was or who he was with.

"Good." He nodded, his smile kind. "I look forward to meeting him, and now we will be friends."

I smiled at him. "Is that right? You just say it and it's written in stone?"

"Yes." He grinned wickedly, and I watched his eyes glint.

"We'll be very good friends."

The words were genuine, and I found that between how quickly he had backed off, the warmth in his golden-brown eyes, his deep, and his smile, that I liked him. And the man was definitely easy on the eyes.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, muscular, but not overly so, with that whole V-line to him. His upper body tapered to a narrow waist and lean hips flowed down into long, muscular legs that his dress pants were clinging to. The man looked toned and hard all over, and the skin peeking out of the open collar of his dress shirt was dark bronze.

Gorgeous man—sensual, graceful, alluring, you looked at him and thought "sex" in neon lights. But even as needy as my body was, he was not for me. Only one man would do, and because he wasn't around, my baser instincts were locked up tight. One night of hot sweaty mind-blowing sex was not worth a man who put up with my bullshit on a day-to-day basis, even if he'd been absent lately for the uphill grind of living with me.

"Angel?"

I realized my mind had been drifting. "Sorry." The way he smiled let me know that he had already decided that I was an airhead.

"Shit."

He chuckled. "What?"

"Nothing."

He looked me in the eye for long minutes before he smiled wide. "You have no idea who I am, do you?"

"I guess not." I squinted at him. "Should I?"

"No, you shouldn't," he assured me before taking a quick breath. "So, Angel, does your relationship with your partner allow for friendship? Especially while your lover is out of town?"

"Uh," I groaned.

He let out a bark of laughter. "What was that?"

"Just the lover. I just hate that word. It's so dated."

"Is it?" He looked surprised. "Lover's dated?"

I made another gagging noise, and he laughed at me again.

"You're adorable."

I waggled my eyebrows at him. "Wait and see. I'll end up driving you nuts."

He shrugged. "Maybe not. Let's test your theory. Have drinks with me and Eddie and my friends, and then dinner. We're eating at my favorite cantina, and the owner cooks special for me."

That sounded really good. I had been ditching my friends, ignoring invitations, just sort of walking around in a funk for almost four months. The idea of going out with people who didn't know me and who wouldn't press me for answers that I didn't have was somewhat appealing. It was like I could quit being me for a second.

"And the gazpacho there is incredible."

I was warming to the idea. It was still early, and he was harmless, after all. "I drive."

"Agreed." His eyes darkened, turning almost black. "You drive, I'll navigate."

"Deal," I said, noticing again how dark and deep his eyes were.

The way he was studying me, after a minute I had to smile. "What are you trying to figure out?"

"Nothing, come," he said as Adan and Paz appeared like they had been waiting somewhere close, hovering, listening for their cue to return. "Let's go."

As we walked toward my car, he reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. The man was very demonstrative, and you could tell it was just

him and didn't really mean a whole lot. And it was kind of nice, so I let it go. What harm could it do?

I WAS directed to drive to the Chicago Harbor, where the Dog Star was anchored. I actually had a nice talk with Cristo in my ancient Toyota Corolla wagon on the long drive from Highland Park. Eddie and everyone else followed behind us, his brother having allowed no one else to ride with us. I had him in stitches explaining about the horrors of Mr. Fisher's home, his eyes huge when I explained about the giant spool. When I passed him my phone so he could see the pictures himself, he was stunned.

"Holy shit," he breathed out, "I thought you were making it worse than it really was."

"Who needs to? Look at the macramé plant holder."

"Jesus." He was amazed and made me promise to show him the "after" photos when the renovations were done.

When we parked at the harbor, everyone joined us, a limousine full of people, and I noticed that there were a lot of very attractive women in the bunch.

"Don't feel like you gotta babysit me," I told him, tipping my head toward a particularly leggy blond who was giving him the eye.

He directed Eddie to make sure that neither the girl nor her

friend slipped and fell in her heels, at the same time he draped an arm around my shoulders.

We had to climb a ladder to get on the boat, ship, whatever it was, and when Cristo chuckled below me, I asked him what was so funny.

"Not funny," he assured me, "just the view is nice."

I leaned down and flicked him on the forehead.

"Owww," he said, laughing, rubbing the space between his eyebrows. "God, you're an ass."

"Exactly, so stop staring at mine."

"I don't think I can," he growled. "You are put together really nice, Angel."

I flicked him again.

"What was that for?"

"Jory, not Angel."

"For fuck's sake, will you just get up there already?"

He was irritated and I was pleased. Once we all got on deck, I heard the thump of the dance music even through the closed door.

Inside it was like a club, the low lights, people smashed together, the cloud of cigarette smoke, waiters moving through the crowd with drinks on trays. Pushing through the throng, I came to the edge of one floor and looked down into another, the sunken room not for dancing but for entertaining.

It was like a mini sports bar. There were huge multi-screens on the walls, a pinball machine, an air hockey table, foosball, and more than one pool table. As my eyes took in everything at once, my attention was caught by one of the men at the pool table closest to me.

Defined muscles in his broad back flexed and bunched under a dress shirt that was straining across wide shoulders, bulging biceps, triceps, and fell untucked over a firm, round, tight ass. His movement was fluid for a big man, and I was reminded of the carved specimen that usually resided in my bed.

"Oh shit." I caught my breath when the man turned, because I was looking at Sam Kage... and not, at the very same time.

The light brown hair with highlights in it—copper, gold, bronze, and wheat—was gone, replaced by black waves even darker than Dane's. It looked so alien. The goatee was out of place, as was the stubbly mustache, since Sam was normally clean shaven. The shirt, open halfway down his chest, revealing his rippling torso, was a treat, but hardly in the man's comfort zone. I had never seen him wear jewelry with the exception of his wedding ring and his watch, so the diamond cross that was hanging from his neck was glaring, drawing my eye. I also saw that his wedding ring was very absent. Taken all together, he looked weird, like him but not like him all at the same time. I knew him on sight; he would have to be invisible for me not to notice him, but why he was dressed like an extra from *Miami Vice* back in the day, I could not imagine. I would have to take a picture so I could show his sisters. They would laugh for weeks.

For the life of me, I couldn't decide on a plan of action. My first thought was that I should wave, second, I was going to rush across the room and launch myself at him, and door number three was me just yelling until all my frustration with his absence was vented. It would drag on for several minutes, I was just sure.

In the end I did nothing, because wonder of wonders, my brain actually kicked in. Standing there like a statue, staring at the man I loved, I realized that we were both in trouble if I said even a word to him. Obviously he was undercover, as *what* I had no idea, but I knew

I would blow it for him if I didn't just walk away. I had to walk away.

And I was going to, I was ready to, up until the second he looked up and his eyes hit mine. He did a quick double take, and I was swallowed in smoky blue. He couldn't change his eyes without contacts, and looking into the familiar heat made my knees weak. The whimper in the back of my throat could not be stopped. He moved fast, crossing the floor to me.

I braced for the assault.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled at me under his breath the second he was close enough.

I noticed his lashes had not been dyed to match his hair, and were still long, thick, and gold. The jet-black hair was colored so there were no highlights in it, flat black, not glossy, but still thick, still that which I wanted to run my fingers through and mess all up. He would look phenomenal all tousled in bed. I wondered if they had dyed the hair between his navel and his groin black as well. Did they mess with the treasure trail? The thought hit me like a fist, slamming through me so hard that I had to suck in a breath. I ached to be under him.

"Jory." My name was spoken deep and low.

"Oh," I said, stalling, trying to remember what he'd asked me.

Looking at him, being close to him, my mind had gone blank.

"J?"

Wait, where was I again?

"Focus," he snapped at me, the annoyance there in his strained voice.

But he was right there in front of me, and it took everything I had not to reach out and put my hand on his face, another on his rock-hard abdomen. I wanted to touch him so badly my stomach hurt.

"What the fuck are—"

"I came with Cristo Liron," I managed to get out, coughing to find volume.
"I saved his brother Eddie yesterday."

His eyes filled with ice, went cold that fast, and I was going to say something when a woman was suddenly there, leaning on him, over his shoulder, pressing her breasts against his heaving chest.

"Here you are, Jace," she drawled, her long red nails tracing across his bare skin before she slipped her palm inside his shirt.

"Come back and sit down. I want to be in your lap."

I felt my face get hot as I bit the inside of my left cheek. It hurt and that was good.

"Angel?"

Turning to the sound of the voice, I found Cristo. His hand went instantly to my shoulder to steady me.

"Are you all right?" He sounded concerned, looking into my eyes, checking.
"You look like you're about to pass out."

I couldn't breathe.

"Angel." He leaned in close, his other hand sliding under my chin to tilt my head back, raising my eyes to his. "Do you need some air?"

"I—"

"You're white as a sheet."

A throat cleared, and Cristo looked beyond me as his face broke into a smile. "Oh, Avery, there you are. I was looking for you. Are you ready to do business?"

He turned me around, arm draped over my shoulder, and I was faced with Agent Zane Calhoun in drag. The last time I had seen the FBI agent who hated me had been three years ago in Dallas, when I had been running from him. And now there he was, with Sam, looking ridiculous, looking like a parody of a drug dealer, like a bad *Saturday Night Live* skit. He even had an earring. At least Sam didn't have an earring. I took a deep breath so I wouldn't laugh or yell or rip the woman's hands off the love of my life. I felt like I was slowly suffocating to death.

"I'll be back," I announced, pulling free of Cristo's arm, walking from the room instead of bolting, proud of myself for not running and drawing attention to myself.

I had no idea where I was going. I just pushed and shoved, turning knobs, going from one room to another, passing by people talking, laughing, drinking, making out, doing lines of cocaine off tables, just being loud—it was a party, after all—until I was in some room with a sink, maybe the kitchen, or galley, since I was on a boat.

I should have just retraced my steps and gone outside. I needed air. I needed to breathe.

I clutched the counter and concentrated on calming my racing pulse. A loud bang startled me, making me gasp in alarm. The door had been slammed open so hard I was surprised it remained on the hinges.

"What the fuck is going on?" Sam roared at me, coming around the counter, hands on my arms, fingers digging into my skin. "How the hell do you know Cristo Liron, and why the fuck does he have his goddamn hands all over you?"

"Who's the girl?" I asked him.

"Did you hear me?" he yelled.

"Who's the girl?" I repeated.

"The girl doesn't fuckin' matter," he snarled at me, shaking me hard. "What matters is Cristo Liron, drug smuggler, gun runner, murdering piece of shit fuck has his fuckin' hands all over you! You have two seconds to tell me what—"

The door opened, and Sam let me go, turned, pulled his gun, and had it leveled at whoever was there so fast my eyes couldn't follow the motion. It had been one continuous fluid movement.

"This is un-fucking-believable!" Agent Calhoun yelled as he stormed into the room. "Are you kidding with this? What the hell are you doing here, Harcourt?"

I was speechless, staring at both of them, taking in the whole picture. I was back in time, and I expected Don Johnson in a white suit and a sleeveless pink T-shirt at any second. They were both dressed in pastel Easter colors. It was surreal.

"You are putting us all in danger by being here!"

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, to respond to him, to the anger in his voice, but found myself at a loss.

"Jesus Christ!" he yelled, throwing up his hands.

And just like that, seeing his disgust with me, I was back.

"What're you wearing?" I asked him, my voice dropping low, suddenly just as annoyed as he was.

He picked up the closest thing to him and used it to punctuate his threats. "I'm going to have you thrown in federal—"

"You're threatening me with a whisk," I pointed out snidely.

"This is an ongoing task force inves—"

"I'm just saying," I said, widening my eyes, "whisk."

He threw the kitchen utensil at me, which I easily avoided, having only to lean sideways out of its trajectory. Not that it would have hurt me. I just didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"You—" He stopped himself, turning to Sam. "Fix this now."

"How?" Sam asked through clenched teeth.

"Get him out of here."

"How?"

Calhoun looked at me, and I arched an eyebrow for him.

"We need to get out there before anyone notices we're gone," he told Sam.

"I will not leave Jory alone with that guy. It's not happening."

"Sam, you cannot blow this case for—"

"He's not worried about me," I lied automatically. "He's just worried that I'm gonna blow your cover. When Sam's on the job, he's totally on it," I assured Agent Calhoun. "You know that."

He squinted at me. "I do know that."

"Well, then, see?" I forced a smile. "We're fine. Just both of you should get the hell away from me."

"Jor—"

"I'm fine," I assured Sam coolly. "You guys go ahead. I just need a minute."

He was going to say something, but Calhoun grabbed his arm and tugged hard. They were both gone seconds later. I was trembling when the door opened again, this time revealing Cristo Liron.

"Hey," he said gently, sounding worried as he crossed the room to me.

"What's wrong? Are you claustrophobic or—"

"I'm fine," I assured him, stepping back. "I was just a little light-headed. I didn't have any dinner, and I—"

"Fuck it," he growled, reaching for me, hands on my face, holding gently but firmly, tipping my head up so he could see my face. "We'll eat now. Business can wait. I—"

"No." I shook my head, feeling out of it, my mind reeling as I pulled free of his touch, putting space between us. "I just wanna go home."

"Shit," he said under his breath, swallowing hard, moving forward only to have me step around him.

"I have to go home." I needed to see all my stuff still where it was, assure myself that I had not gone completely insane over the last hour.

His voice was deep and sultry. "Angel, please just let me take you to dinner."

I cleared my throat. "I'm leaving."

"I shouldn't have brought you here. It's a waste of your time because I have business to conduct, but I just couldn't let you go home... I wanted to spend more time with you."

I moved fast, putting the kitchen island between us before he could protest. I had my graceful way out, and I was going to take it.

"You have things to do, to discuss, and I'm just here doing nothing taking up your time. You wanted to thank me for Eddie, and you did.

It's enough. You don't hafta do any more."

"No, that's not—"

"Eddie's got my number, so maybe next week you guys gimme a call and the three of us can grab lunch or something. Or call me, and we can have dinner, just us... but I need to be done here for the night."

"I want to sit and talk with you."

"Call me, then. The food sounded really great." I tried to smile for him.

After several long minutes, he nodded. "I will call, Angel, make no mistake."

"Good."

He smiled and gestured for the door. I didn't wait. I bolted.

I didn't look for Sam, I just moved. Eyes straight ahead, snaking my way through the crowd, I was back on the deck with the wind on my face in what felt like seconds. Down the ladder, back on the dock, I jogged to the parking lot to my car. Once I was driving, I finally took a breath. I had never been so happy to be going home.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Chapter Four

I TOLD myself nine hundred times that I should not be angry. Sam was undercover. The woman was probably undercover, too, or if she was not, she was a beard and he had not, would not, touch her in any way that could be construed as remotely romantic. I knew it, knew him, and the whole thing was too ridiculous to even consider. My brain understood. My heart seconded the notion, knowing how it felt about him, knowing how he felt about me, and that was all well and good except that my body was hot and needy just thinking about him.

The cold shower I took when I got home didn't work, and I was just as hard and aching and miserable as I was when I got there. I had to pull out the big gun and watch *Saving Private Ryan*. Anyone who can do anything but bawl after the first ten minutes of that movie, let alone keep their libido running, has a mad scary sex drive. Mine shriveled up and died, and I fell asleep on the couch.

By Sunday morning I was mad. There had been no call from him, no e-mail, and no late-night booty call. His case, whatever it was about, strippers, drugs, Hans Zimmer music, was lost on me, but was obviously infinitely more important. I called and cancelled dinner with Dane and Aja because I was such horrible company. No reason to make them miserable too.

I stayed home and started cleaning, but never quite got any one thing completely done. I tended to be a little scattered with my projects around

the house so that normally the dishes would get washed, but not dried. The laundry would be folded, but not put away. The bathtub got scrubbed, but the floor wouldn't get mopped. And that would all be okay, but I left whatever cleaning products spread in various rooms about my home. Sam once found the Clorox wipes in the refrigerator because that's where I was going next before I got diverted by whatever was on TNT at the time or by something VH1 was counting down. I was waiting for best rocker hair but as of yet they hadn't done it.

There has to be some sort of noise on in the background when

I'm cleaning, or just home, for that matter. Silence creeps me out unless I'm reading, but since reading normally puts me to sleep, it all works out. So Monday morning, before work, I was walking around putting all the various items away, the vacuum that was still in the middle of the hall, and the broom that was next to the front door, and everything else, when I got a frantic call from Michelle.

"Jory, honey, did you ask to be off the Fisher account?"

"No, why?" I answered, yawning.

"Because you're off of it and Fallon's working it with me. I hate Fallon."

I was confused, so when I got to work, I went straight in to see my boss, Becker Rowe, doing the fake left and then right maneuver to get into his office around his secretary.

"Jory?" he snapped irritably when he saw me, waving at Miss Shelton to kill her motor when she came charging into the room. "It's fine," he told her, "I had to see Mr. Harcourt this morning, anyway."

This is just somewhat earlier than I imagined doing this."

Doing... this... *uh-oh*.

"Please, Jory, have a seat."

Never, ever good to be invited to sit down and have a talk with your boss first thing Monday morning. I was so fired. "I pissed off Mr. Fisher, huh?"

He squinted at me before he let out a long, deep sigh. "Yes, you did, and I must say that your antics this time were by all accounts completely and utterly unprofessional."

Funny, yes, guaranteed to keep me my job, probably not. I wondered who had ratted me out.

"Mr. Fisher called and spoke to Nora and—"

"Mr. Fisher called?"

"Yes."

Hayes Fisher had called himself to bitch about me. What an ass.

And he had complained to Nora Talbot, our operations manager.

"She said that he was incensed."

Nora Talbot loathed me. Even if Mr. Fisher was only really, really annoyed, he would have been "incensed" when the story was repeated to my boss. Not that I doubted that Mr. Fisher hated me.

Apparently, whether or not Mr. Fisher wanted Dane to design a house for him was a non-issue in the big picture.

"Your complete lack of propriety has become an unwelcome burden on this firm, and furthermore—"

"Sir," I said, cutting him off, "you really don't need to run down all my flaws. We both know there're a lot, and neither one of us want to be here all day. Am I right?"

I was. I was always right about bad stuff. It would be nice to be wrong once in a while.

Everyone was in the regular Monday morning meeting except me. I was cleaning out my desk, my final paycheck in the breast pocket of my suit jacket, and gone—no personal memorabilia allowed, only one family photo permitted—before anyone got out. Of course I was looking at a picture of Sam as I rode down the elevator with my box. The security guard had checked it on my way out, and that didn't help. What was worse was that I had no one to whine to about the debacle my life was at that moment.

Dane would be mad at me for going to see Eddie Liron after he told me not to. If I expected sympathy or a chocolate shake, which was what I really wanted, I would have to come clean. I was not in the mood to come clean or be a grown-up. The idea of covering Mr. Hayes Fisher's front yard with toilet paper was very appealing. But Dane would cancel his appointment with the man for no good reason other than thinking that the guy was a dick for getting me fired. But really, I got myself fired because I just couldn't keep my big mouth shut. And that trait was technically Dane's fault because he never made me keep my mouth shut, but he was my brother, so.... It all whirled around in my head, but as I was trying to catch a cab with my box of nothing except my framed picture of Sam, I felt like crap. And then it started to rain.

"Jory?"

I turned to my left and there was Fallon Strauss. He was going in, and I was coming out for the last time. I shook my head and started walking away. But he was suddenly there, in front of me, lifting an umbrella over me, staring into my face.

"What're you doing?" he asked, looking me over, up and down.

"I'm going home," I said, walking around him, the rain that was really starting to come down soaking me in seconds.

"Jory," he barked at me, barring my path again, the umbrella keeping me from drowning as he stepped in closer. "What're you talking about? We're both late for that stupid meeting."

I shook my head. "I just got fired."

His lime-green eyes got huge. "Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not ki—I gotta go, Fal. I'm gonna drown here."

He grabbed the lapel of my peacoat and dragged me halfway down the street to a steakhouse that had a wide awning. The restaurant wasn't open yet, so we were alone, but it was loud, the water rushing down the sides as if the sky had opened up and just dumped down water.

"Jory," he said, shaking himself off, taking off his wire-framed glasses, which had fogged up. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I put my now-soggy box down on the bench under the restaurant menu board and took his glasses from him before he could say a word. My T-shirt, two layers down under my suit jacket, was dry. I wiped the lenses carefully, the cold air hitting my bare abdomen like ice as I wiped them and then handed them back. His expression was hard to read.

"That was certainly a nice view," he said, smiling sheepishly.

"Sorry?"

He shook his head. "Jesus, Jory, are you really this oblivious?"

"You lost me."

He sighed heavily. "Were you serious? Becker fired you?"

"Yep, just now. I pissed off Mr. Fisher, apparently."

He nodded. "I see. That explains my client meeting this afternoon. I was supposed to be seeing Michelle this morning."

"Supposed to be?"

"Yeah," he said, dragging his hand through his short, dark brown curls. "Listen, I've been working on a deal for a while now that I've wanted to talk to you about, so this is absolutely amazing that I ran into you... and fucking terrifying at the same time."

I studied his face and realized that he looked really nervous.

"Jory, I'm resigning today and going to work for Benchmark Limited, and I would really, really like it if you came with me."

I was still home sleeping in my bed, I just knew it. "What?"

He exhaled quickly. "You—I listen to you when we have meetings and stuff, and your ideas about events are good. They just never put you in charge of anything because you're so all over the place. I think your thoughts and sort of rabid excitement would be great if it were tempered with someone who grounded you and could see the task through to the end."

I was in some bizarro alternate universe where Fallon Strauss and I were friends or had actually spoken more than ten words to each other in our entire lives.

"I'm freaking you out."

"Little bit, but go on."

"Michelle's so worried that I want her job that she can't get past it." He smiled at me, shifting from one foot to the other, his restless hand back in his curls, tugging on them. "But she said that as far as concepts go and coming up with things out of the blue that you're the guy. It's just that your follow-through is shit."

Which was true. Michelle knew me at work very well. "She didn't have to say it was shit."

A smile lit his eyes, and I actually saw the man for the first time.

He had dark, thick, wavy brown hair, olive skin, and expressive eyebrows that made him look like he was plotting something.

Handsome, no, but warm and easy to like, yes. So why hadn't I really seen him before this?

"So, Pete Riggs over at Benchmark, he told me that I should bring you in, have you sit down and talk to him and see what you're like. I mean, it's event planning, and I know it's not what you want to do with your life, but you get that you're very good at it, and people just either love you or hate you from the second they meet you."

No argument there.

"So maybe you want to go home, change, and meet me for lunch at Carnivale downtown at one with Pete and his business partner, Anna Pearlman."

"You're serious?"

"Yes," he said, chuckling, "very. I think you and I could work really well together, and even though I know it might not be for long, since, like I said, I know it's not your lifelong dream or anything, I'm willing to try it."

"When were you—"

"I was going to ask to see you today. I sent you a text message."

And after he left, after I agreed to the meeting, when I checked, the message was there on my phone. It started with J. Not Jory, J. I liked that a lot.

I CLEAN up well. I wore my Pinwale Cord suit under my tweed topcoat to meet my possible new employer. I thought Fallon was going to pass out from shock.

"What?"

"No, nothing," he said, his eyes all over me. "You just... you look, you look good."

I smiled at him. "Where's the table."

"You want a drink?"

"No, I'm good."

He led me to the table, and the second I reached it, I turned on the charm. Something about how badly Fallon wanted it to work transferred to interest on my end. He was excited to work with me, so I felt the same back. It had been a long time since anyone was happy to have me along.

Gina loved me, but I exhausted her. For Michelle, I was a chore.

She had to be on her guard and watchful, concerned with her career, so therefore, worried about what I would say or do and how that would reflect on her. And I understood it all. I tired everyone out who came in contact with me on a regular basis. Maybe that was the reason for Sam's extended absence. Maybe he just needed a break.

And it wasn't as though I wasn't loved. Both Gina and Michelle adored me, but it's like when your drunken uncle goes home and you can breathe and enjoy the rest of the family gathering in peace. I made Gina and Michelle wary, and I was tired of doing that and being treated like that even if I was on my best behavior.

But Fallon, Fallon wanted me in the cockpit with him. He wasn't treating me like I was stupid or a burden or draining. He wasn't rolling his eyes, telling me it was lucky I was pretty since I wasn't bright, or placating me. He was treating me like an equal, he was counting on me, and it was really sort of different and kind of nice. I didn't want to let him down. It was suddenly very important, and everything else fell away.

"Pleasure," I said to Mr. Riggs and then said it to Mrs. Pearlman as well. I was quiet, I nodded in all the right places, and I smiled when anyone looked

at me.

"What do you think?" Fallon asked me in that lull between when you order lunch and when it comes. Right after everyone passes the waiter the menus and you have to start a new topic.

"About what?" I asked him.

"J?"

"Like you really wanna know or you want me to sit here and be polite?"

"I for one would like to really know," Mrs. Pearlman said.

I liked her already. Mr. Riggs seemed unsure. I wasn't sure if it was me that was making him twitchy or the restaurant or his gin and tonic or his tie he kept fiddling with... I didn't know. But Mrs. Pearlman, Anna, her, I liked, and I could tell she liked me back. But it was kind of a given. Me and women, it was sort of destined.

"I think people don't want to be lied to. I think if their event sucks or the idea stinks that you owe it to the client to say no, it's crap, and this is why, and not just go along with it and point at it later and say at least it wasn't your idea so it ain't your fault. Because you produced the train wreck no matter how you slice it, so if it sucks, then by all rights you do too. Just spit it out, that's my motto."

"Mr. Har—"

"No, wait," I corrected myself, thinking. "That's Dane's motto.

Mine is when in doubt throw it out 'cause if it's really important, you can ask someone to fax you another one."

"Mr. Har—"

"And that's only my work motto, mind you. At home I keep stuff. Some stuff. Not like newspapers or crap like that, I'm not a hoarder. I just mean

like old records or pictures, you should never throw away pictures."

All three people were staring at me like I'd grown another head.

"What?"

"Okay." Mr. Riggs smiled wide, and I saw him let out a breath and become a completely different person. He suddenly got comfortable right there in front of me. "I like honesty, I like that people get told, and if they don't want to be told, I don't want them as clients. Mr. Har—"

"Jory," I said.

"Jory," he repeated. "Excellent. I think you and Fallon will do well with us. Let's talk some numbers and see if we can put together some sort of package."

Mrs. Pearlman offered me a breadstick and told me that she'd wanted me to work for her since she'd attended the Price event at the

Four Seasons a year ago.

"Oh, the *Saturday Night Fever* party," I said, grinning at her.

"Your master of ceremonies quit at the last minute, and you had to fill in." She smiled at me. "Mr. Har—Jory, I have not laughed that hard in years. I was crying all over my husband."

I took her hand and squeezed it. She squeezed back.

"Oh," she said quickly, almost startling herself, and we all looked at her. "I just put it together what you said a minute ago about Dane... are you related to Dane Harcourt, the architect?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's my brother."

Whatever she had liked about me seconds ago was made even better, bolstered as I was by my brother and his flawless reputation.

"Dane Harcourt is the most amazing, intriguing man... he's just really..."

"Something," I offered.

"Yes," she breathed out.

And the way her voice did that thing when she said his name let me know everything I needed to. She was in love with my brother.

Not in the way where she didn't love her husband, just the way every woman I knew crushed on him just a little. And that was okay. His wife didn't mind that. The all-out flirting, that was the only thing that irritated her.

I still remembered the night Aja and Dane had met. It was a black-tie fundraiser, and the lady had crossed the room to ask him to dance. And it was not that she was the first woman who had ever asked, but it was the way she had spoken to him. Confident, powerful, but warm all at the same time. She knew who she was, she knew what she was about, and she knew she was looking at her future husband.

Dane, who needed a partner, an equal, found most women wanting to surrender up their lives to him, wanting him to lead. Aja Greene was different. She wanted to join her life with his, not disappear. She didn't need him to take care of her; she could take care of herself. She was never jealous or possessive, certain that she was the one for him. Dane had been in agreement after their first words were spoken. Aja was not the first woman to ever ask him to dance, but she was the last.

"Jory?"

"Sorry," I said with a cough. "It's nice to hear that you like him 'cause really he's kind of a jerk."

She chuckled, nodding, squeezing my hand before she let go. "Is he?"

"I swear."

"Well, let's talk about you now. Let's see if we can come to terms that will work for you," she sighed, and the sound included Fallon as well.

Three hours later, I was standing outside in a monsoon under the canopy waiting for a cab with Fallon Strauss. In one month, because the company was moving offices from one building to a more centralized location downtown, on a Monday, we would meet with Mr. Riggs and Mrs. Pearlman again, and they would have a package ironed out for us. It was the promise of a job without a signed contract, but because of the reputation of the company, we were sure to be the newest creative team at Benchmark Limited.

"I don't know what to say," I told him, "which is a stupid thing to say since saying words at all means I did say something."

He shook his head. "Jesus, Jory, you're really something."

"Something good or something bad?"

"Good," he said as he smiled at me, reaching out and fiddling with my tie, adjusting it. "So I'm going to the office and cleaning out my desk. Let's have dinner this week and talk about things, and then meet a few times before we start, okay?"

"You're taking this team thing to heart, huh?"

"Aren't you?"

He had snatched me from professional death, and I owed him big. "I am." But more importantly, I was kind of digging him.

"How about we meet at Trieste, in Lincoln Park, Saturday at eight? I'll buy you a steak."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'd like you to meet my partner."

"Really?" That was really nice and meant a lot, the sharing. "I'd love to."

"You would?"

I nodded.

"You want to bring Detective Kage?"

I cleared my throat. "Um, Detective Kage is on assignment, so he can't come. But I would love to come and meet your man."

His smile was huge. "Okay, then, eight."

"Eight it is."

He looked at me and I lunged. When I was hugging the life out of him, the last of his reserve melted away. He wrapped me up and squeezed the breath out of me back. As I watched him walk down the street away from me, I finally checked my phone. Forty-two missed calls was a lot.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Chapter Five

I CALLED to tell Dylan the good news, and she was glad to hear it and just a little jealous. She and I had been a creative team for years, and she was not crazy about the idea of someone taking her place.

Once I explained that no one ever could, she was happy for me. And then I told her I was really okay about being fired. It took nine more times of me saying, "I swear to God," and her asking if I was super sure, before she almost, maybe, believed me. When Michelle called, I gave her the same speech about being okay without the endless assurances. I wished her well and hung up. I didn't answer when she called back, what was the point?

Everyone checked on me after that, Wade and Gina among them, and I realized that there were more people at the firm that gave a damn than I thought there were. But I didn't want to have dinner, and I didn't need to have drinks and talk since I was not, really, on the verge of suicide. Yes, I had heard that Fallon quit, and yes, that was interesting. Yes, we could have dinner soon, and I was, truly, fine.

This was all in a flurry of phone calls after lunch. After two, as I finally finished putting away the scattered laundry, watered the plants, and made a grocery list, there were more calls. I was surprised by the one from my newly ex-boss.

"Mr. Rowe?" I asked as I walked through the store, gathering the ingredients for crab stuffed with tuna and spinach. I was craving it.

"Jory," he breathed out, "at last."

Had I missed other calls?

"Were you not answering on purpose?"

"No, did you maybe call Sam?"

"Sam?"

"My partner," I told him. "His number is only one digit different from mine." I smiled into the receiver, biting my lip. How funny was it if Sam's phone, wherever the hell it was, had been ringing off the hook all day. "I think maybe you called him."

"Oh... perhaps."

I cleared my throat. "Something you wanted? I gave my keys to the sec—"

"Jory," he said, clearing his throat, "there's been a mistake."

"How so?"

He coughed. "It seems that Mr. Fisher told Nora that he only wanted to proceed if you supervised the project. He didn't want you off the project."

So it was good that I had deleted the "fuck you very much" e-mail I wrote the man instead of sending it to him. I was also glad I didn't tell Dane that Hayes Fisher was a dick and to cancel his appointment. Which was crappy, but I was going to do it, and Dane would have screwed him over because he simply liked me better.

"Oh."

"And the things that were said in our conversation this morning were—"

"All true," I told him. "I am immature and I am loud and I do give my opinion away far too freely," I said, paraphrasing him. "And

I do dress a little too casually and I do flirt and I do annoy a helluva lot of people."

"Jory, I—"

"It's true," I sighed. "And for that reason it's probably good that I'm goin' with Fal to Benchmark. Having me around is a liability that you don't need. This way you don't have to deal with it."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Mr. Rowe?"

"You're going with Fallon?" he asked me, clearing his throat.

"Yeah."

"I see. You and Fallon... to Benchmark. When, may I ask?"

"In a month."

"I see."

"He told you, didn't he?"

"He said he was leaving. He didn't mention that you were going with him."

"Oh, well, he should have." I would call Fallon and tell him that when he talked to other people to lump me in with him. "So I've gotta go, but thank you, sir, for everything, and I guess for firing me since I have a new job that sounds like it'll be good."

"Jory, I would really like the oppor—"

"Thank you, sir, good night," I said and hung up. I then called Fallon.

"Hello?"

"Hey, this is Jory. Can I talk to Fal?"

"Jory?"

"His new partner, Jory."

Ticks of silence went by. I was getting that a lot. "Oh! Yes, Jory, he told me you... I thought we were—"

"I just have a quick thing to say to him if I could."

There was coughing, then, "Yes, um, sure, yeah, hold on."

I grabbed the shallots and the mango chutney as I waited.

"J?"

"Hey." I smiled into the phone. "When people ask you who your partner is, say it's me, okay?"

"What?"

"I just talked to Mr. Rowe, and he said that—"

"Becker called you? Why?"

"Becker?" I teased him. "I thought that was funny earlier 'cause I mean shit, you were on a first-name basis with our old boss, you know?"

"Just—what did he want, Jory?"

"Something about there being a mistake, I dunno, I wasn't really listening, but he said that he knew you were going to Benchmark, but he didn't know that I was going with you. So do me a favor and say, okay? Tell people that we're a team, Strauss and Harcourt, it sounds good, right?"

He sounded hoarse when he spoke. "Yes, Jory, it does."

"So say, all right?"

"I will."

"Okay, so that's—"

"Becker," he said, cutting me off, "he didn't change your mind?"

"Change my mind about what?"

"C'mon, Jory, he wants you back."

"Maybe, but not really, and he for sure doesn't like me. He just puts up with me. And this morning he said all kinds of crap about me that he felt was actually true or he wouldn't have said it in the first place, so it's fine. I couldn't go back, and I don't wanna go back. If you don't want me around, I don't wanna be around, ya know?"

"Yes, I do know."

"Okay."

He sighed deeply.

"We're still on for Saturday right?"

"Saturday, for sure, but how 'bout tonight as well? I have friends coming over. They're congratulating me for taking the plunge to get my career on track. Why don't you join us?"

That sounded good, actually. "Yeah? You sure?"

"Very."

"Well, I'm actually at the store if you wanna tell me what you need."

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"Can you grab me some white wine, your choice, ice, and some kind of cheese that goes with fruit and crackers?"

"Absolutely. Two bottles of wine or three?"

"Three would be perfect."

"Okay, where do you live?"

I WAS confused. Normally I knew what I did when I did it, but this time, I was at a loss. When my phone rang, I answered on the second ring. I didn't check the number, I just said hello.

"Angel."

"Oh, hey, Cris," I sighed, having memorized the man's voice with just one meeting.

"You know my voice."

It was a big deal to a lot of people. I never really understood why. "'Course, but you're also the only guy who calls me Angel."

"Okay."

"Which you should stop doing, by the way."

"I'll try," he told me, clearing his throat. "You sound terrible."

What's wrong?"

"I dunno, but I pissed off Shane, and I have no idea what I did."

He chuckled. "Since I have no clue who the hell Shane is, could you maybe start at the beginning?"

So I explained to him how I had gone to the condo in Lincoln Park, been buzzed up through the security door, and had stood waiting outside on the welcome mat to be let in. The door had opened, and the man there had been thrilled to see me until I told him who I was.

Shane McGill had looked me up and down and then left me there, haunting the doorstep, as he walked away. I didn't know whether to keep standing there or go in or ring the doorbell or what. I had poked my head in after a few minutes, and Fallon was there to warmly greet me, apologizing profusely for his significant other. I had no inkling as to what was going on.

Everyone else was nice. Fallon's friends were fun and interesting, and even though I made myself busy in the kitchen, I still had lots of time to visit.

"Angel."

"What?" I asked, interrupting my narrative.

"Did you maybe think that Sean—"

"Shane."

"Sorry. Shane. Did you ever think that maybe Shane wanted to host his own party?"

"No, it wasn't like that, and he was pissed at me way before—"

"Ask you a question."

"Sure," I said as I walked toward my car, never upset when other people cut me off since I did it all the time myself.

"What're you wearing?"

I laughed. "This is not one of those phone—"

"Just tell me, smartass," he said, chuckling.

I looked down my body. "Jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt, sneakers... nothing great."

"Okay, I know what's wrong."

"What? No, you don't."

"I do," he said, and I noted how deep and soft his voice was.

"You know you could make like millions of dollars as a phone-sex operator."

Long silence.

"Hello?"

"Do you ever think before you speak, or do you just think it and say it at the same time?"

"If we're friends, like you said we were, then I just say whatever pops into my head. I only censor myself if I don't really know you."

"Uh-huh."

"Why?"

Heavy sigh from him, then, "Christ, Angel...."

"Christ, Angel what?"

"Okay," he groaned, "now listen to me. The problem is that your new business partner, Fallon, his boyfriend is terrified of you."

"I'm sorry?" I hadn't heard him right.

He laughed at me. "God, you're cute. How old are you?"

"I'm not cute. I'm thirty!"

"Oh, baby, I would've thought you were twenty-three, twenty-four tops."

"What does that—"

"Angel, I promise you, the partner wants to drop you into a wood chipper."

"What?" I said indignantly. He did not. "That's disgusting."

He cleared his throat. "What did your new partner say?"

"I dunno. He just said that Shane had some concerns about me, and so we probably shouldn't hang out when we weren't at work, and... I mean I don't wanna cause him any—"

"It's the boyfriend's insecurity. He just doesn't know you."

"What makes you say that?"

"If he knew you better, he'd know that you would never hit on your partner at work. You're in a relationship with your man already."

I sighed, thinking about Sam, the man who didn't even call to let me know he was in town. "Yep."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"No," I muttered defensively.

He cleared his throat. "So apparently from when I saw you last, you have a new job."

"Yeah."

"Doing what?"

"Kind of what I used to do when I had my own business."

"You had your own business?"

"Yeah." I sighed wistfully.

"Tell me about it."

And I was thinking I wanted to talk to him, but I wanted to see his face. He had a good face. I was worried for a second about what that meant.

"Angel?"

"I wanna eat at the Mexican place with the gazpacho, but I don't want you to think that we're gonna be more than friends... but I would really like it if we could be that."

He chuckled and it was deep and sultry and nice. "We can be that, Angel."

"You gotta quit with—"

"Jory," he said, breathing out my name.

"Listen," I said quickly, thinking that I had to give him his out and not be selfish with what I wanted, a friend who didn't really know me yet, who it would be easy to be around. "I need to tell you something before we get to be friends and then I spring this on you and you think I lied because I try to never lie or even sin by omission."

"Jesus, you're exhausting."

I knew that. "So my man is a cop," I blurted out, "and so maybe you should leave me alone if your business is dicey."

"What kind of cop?"

"Vice."

"I see. What's his name?"

All he had to have was a mediocre background-check guy who could check out deeds for lofts in the city. It would be easy to find out who I lived with.

"Sam Kage."

"But he's gone, you say."

"Not gone, just away."

"How long?"

"Close to four months."

"So see, he's busy catching someone else, not me."

Maybe not.

"It doesn't matter. A vice cop and I would never have words."

"No?"

"No, Jory, I've never been busted for anything."

I thought about that. "I could be wearing a wire."

"You watch too much television," he grunted at me.

It was true.

"Four months is a long time."

Yes, it was.

And Sam was in Chicago, but had made no effort to see or even call me. Sam had completely ignored my questions about the woman draped over him on the yacht. Sam had not cared that it *looked* like I was on a date. He had been, obviously, more concerned with the fact that Cristo Liron was a criminal. *Possibly* a criminal. I had no way to either confirm or deny the existence of a police record as the person who would usually tell me these things was the same one who was working hard to ignore my very

existence. It boggled my mind that he couldn't even spare a two-minute phone call from a payphone on his way to check in.

None of it would have mattered if I knew where I stood. And while I knew I was loved, I had no idea where he was with his life-changing decisions. Was he switching jobs, cities, priorities? And was I to be consulted in any of it? I had no idea. All I did know was that it felt like Sam had to decide between a job as a deputy US marshal and me. And if it came down to it, what could he really choose? He loved me, but the job was *who* he was. What right did I have to ask him to give up his identity for me? I would tumble right down the rabbit hole if I kept thinking about it, so I made a conscious decision to stop.

"Angel?"

Back in the now, I took a quick breath. "We gotta get shit straight."

"Like?"

"I just look stupid," I told him. "But I'm really not. You wanna sleep with me."

He choked on whatever he was drinking. I hoped he hadn't dribbled. "Jesus, Angel, do you have any subtlety at all?"

"Not so much, no." I sighed. "So tell me, what are you thinking is going to happen here?"

"I don't know." He cleared his throat. "Because I really have no idea what to make of you."

"In what way?"

"Well, you saved my little brother, and you're not afraid of me, and your ass has got to be the most perfect one I've ever seen in my life."

"What does my ass have to do with anything?"

"I want to hold it in my hands."

"But you can't."

"I know that, but it doesn't make me want to any less."

"So maybe we shouldn't hang out if that's—"

"I can control myself," he said with a chuckle.

"But why should you have to? You're hot. You can have anybody you want. Why waste time hanging out with me when it'll just frustrate you?"

"Because I like you even more than I want to fuck you."

"Yeah?" I was surprised and hopeful.

"Angel, you're so pretty, my stomach hurts just looking at you, and I would be lying if I said that the idea of fucking you has not been something I've been thinking about since we first met."

Me too, but in a fantasy way, not in a possibility-of-actually- happening way.

"But I find that I also want to just sit and talk to you and try and figure out what's going on in your head."

I swallowed hard.

"We can be friends, Angel, but when I take other men home and you go home alone to an empty bed, you have no one to blame but yourself."

He sounded very sure of himself, and something became crystal clear.
"You've never been in love."

"What?"

"You haven't," I said, laughing at him. "Because if you ever had been, you'd understand that going home alone sucks, being alone sucks, but you do it because you have no choice."

"Angel—"

"It's not a sacrifice on my part to not sleep with you."

"No, I didn't mean it like—"

"Sleeping with you I would just be another guy you fucked, and you would just be standing in for the guy I really want." Because as mad as I was, as lonely, as hurt, Sam Kage was still the only man I took off my clothes for. "So us is never gonna happen."

"Angel—"

"I gotta go, Cris. I'll talk to you later."

"No, don't do that, don't blow me off. I'm sorry, okay? I don't get the opportunity to have people in my life I don't have to worry about who I can just trust to not fuck me over, so c'mon, forgive me, already. Let's go eat."

I wasn't sure. It had sounded like it was going bad fast.

"Angel." He chuckled and ended with a sigh. "Please, let's get some dinner. It's my treat. Next time it's your turn."

Next time? My turn? Suddenly everything seemed back on track. We weren't on a date, we were just hanging out. "Okay." I smiled into the phone. "Where should I meet you?"

And because he was no longer interested in getting in my pants, he told me where to meet him and finished with telling me to hurry the hell up because he was starving. Just like normal. I was very pleased with the man.

CHAPTER
SIX

Chapter Six

I SHOULD have felt weird, but because Cristo didn't, eating with five men keeping watch over him, I stopped thinking about it. Two of the men, Paz and Adan, I already knew, and though I was not introduced to the others, I got nods of greeting. Normally they didn't acknowledge anyone, Cristo told me, but since I had saved his little brother, apparently I was in a different league from everyone else.

True to his word, the restaurant, Corazon, was small and intimate, and the proprietress came to our table to ask him what he would like. It turned out that Cristo had given her the loan to start her business, and even more than that, they were friends.

"Tell me all about yourself," he told me, sipping his beer from the bottle, leaning his cheek on his fist, his eyes gentle on me.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me how you and the cop met."

So I told him about how the simple, totally nothing errand, picking up my friend's dog, had become the pivotal moment of my life. I told him about how I had been kidnapped and shot, and how Sam had been gone for three years and how he had come back. I talked and did voices and laughed, because it was funny in retrospect.

"What?" I asked when I noticed how big his eyes were.

"Jesus Christ, Angel," he said flatly, staring at me.

"It's no big deal."

"It kind of is."

And it kind of was, but I was now another three years away from it, and distance made it more like a movie than anything else.

But the way he was looking at me, studying my face, his tender expression, the concern in his eyes, was very nice.

"Hey, I know this really good pie place after," I suggested.

"Absolutely."

I ate like a pig, which charmed the owner completely, and thanked her for my dinner and hugged her and told her that the Poc-Chuc and Picadillo were two of my favorite dishes and that her rice and the mollette were to die for.

"You knew what you were eating?" Cristo smiled at me when she was gone.

"Course," I said, squinting at him. "I cook some, too, you know."

He nodded. "Really? You cook?"

"Yes, I cook."

Quick grunt from him. "So do you—"

"Cris."

We both looked up at Paz, and his eyes were facing forward, intent on something else. Following his gaze, I saw Sam and Agent Calhoun, again in their drug-dealer clothes, crossing the floor with two other men. I stopped breathing. Paz and Adan moved in closer, flanking Cristo and me as they stopped a few feet from us.

"May we join you for dinner, Mr. Liron?" one of the men I didn't know asked.

"Actually, we're already done," Cristo said, leaning back, draping his arm over the back of my chair. "But please, join us for a drink before we leave to get dessert."

"Excellent." He smiled tightly, turning to look at the others and gesturing at the empty seats at the table.

Since I felt like I would fly apart, I concentrated on the air moving in and out of my lungs. Sam moved around the table fast, taking a seat beside me, sitting so that when he did, his knee bumped mine under the table.

"I don't know your friend," the man who had asked to join us said, smiling at me.

"This is Jory Harcourt. Jory, this is Adrian Miller of—"

"Harcourt." He squinted at me.

"Yep." I took a breath. "Related to Dane, who won't design a house for you, yessir."

"Why won't he design a house for him?" the man beside him asked me.

"His reasons are his own."

"What's your guess?" he asked me, eyes narrowed.

"I'm sure I have no idea."

He pointed at me. "I don't like your tone, Mr. Harcourt."

I shrugged. "I can't help that."

"I think maybe you better change it before I change it for you."

I scoffed, smirking at him. Better people than him had tried, and whether he knew it or not, the man who loved me was sitting on my left with his knee against mine. When Sam was close to me, I was bulletproof.

"You need to put a muzzle on your bitch," the guy told Cristo.

"And you need to not disrespect me at my own table."

I had no idea Cristo's voice could get so cold, so hard, and so vicious. Instinctively, I put my hand on his forearm.

He covered it with his own.

"Jory has nothing to do with us, and I was going to keep things light and not speak in front of him, but now you've gone and threatened him, and to show you that I won't stand for that I'm going to tell you that our deal is off, Mr. Miller," he said, looking at the other man. "I'm going to do business with—"

"Wait," I said, interrupting him, seeing Mr. Miller's face, watching all the color drain from the guy who had been insulting me.

"Please."

Cristo turned to look at me.

"It's okay. Maybe he feels about Mr. Miller the way I feel about Dane." I looked over at him. "How can I fault him for loyalty?"

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, just his brows furrowed as he stared at me. I looked back at Cristo. "It's okay, okay?"

The warmth seeped back into his eyes as he looked at me, the gold spreading until they were once again honey brown. "Fine," he said as he looked back at the man. "Don't threaten anyone at my table ever again, Zach, you understand?"

He nodded quickly, and his eyes flicked back to me.

I stared back and he couldn't hold my gaze, looking away after a minute.

"Jory."

I turned to look at Cristo, and his smile made me smile back.

"It looks like I have business, so I'll have Paz take you home."

"No," I said, putting my hands in my lap, moving one before I rose, sliding it up Sam's thigh, squeezing gently, loving, as always, the hardness of the muscles. On my feet I realized how close our chairs were, and turned sideways, dragging my groin across his arm as I wedged myself free. "I can get home all by myself, no worries."

Cristo rose, put a hand on my shoulder. "I'll call you."

"Sure." I smiled as he squeezed gently before sitting back down.

"Good night." I smiled and left the table fast. I pulled on my peacoat and started for the door.

"Jory."

Turning, I waited while Zach caught up with me.

"Forgive me."

I shrugged. "It's okay."

"I didn't realize that you and Cristo were just—I thought you were one of his boys."

"No, we're just friends."

He nodded. "Thank you for jumping in."

"You're welcome."

A quick nod and he was gone, leaving me to look after him. I couldn't catch Sam's eye because he was leaning forward at the table, talking, not looking at me at all. It was disheartening to know that none of the man's attention was on me at all. He was the job and nothing else. Cristo noticed me lingering and gestured me to come back.

I waved once and ducked out into the rain. I didn't want to see

him anymore. I would make sure to screen his calls. His attention, his interest, his desire could quickly become addictive if I wasn't careful.

I would strive to be very careful.

THERE was an accident, so I ended up ditching the cab and taking the L home, getting off at the platform and walking. As I closed in on my loft, I let the pain and frustration finally roll through me.

I hated Sam Kage. I needed him desperately, and he didn't need me at all. The thought had been festering for weeks, and now, having seen him twice with no word, left me cold and shaking. I had no idea that I could feel so empty after knowing his heart. And as much as I wanted to keep telling myself that everything was fine and that he loved me and he would just come home and we would resume our life, I knew it was crap. Something had changed; something was very wrong and broken for him to stay away from me. No matter what, I would not have been able to keep myself from him; the fact that he could spoke volumes.

I had to make a change before I drove myself nuts. I had to get out of the city instead of running the risk of turning a corner and seeing him and having him act like we were strangers.

I slammed through the loft when I got home and was standing by one of the windows eating a yogurt when there was a knock at the front door. When I opened it without checking, which I did constantly, I was surprised to find Hayes Fisher there.

"Hey." I smiled at him, calming just looking at him because he was from my work life and me in work mode was different, cooler, and so I was.
"What're you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure," I said, moving aside.

He walked in, and when I locked the door behind him and turned, he was standing there, looking sheepish, with his hands shoved down into his pockets.

"What's wrong with you? You look like hell."

"I didn't want them to fire you. I wanted you to be the one supervising the job, the one I would see every day and talk—"

"Yeah, I know." I nodded, starting on my yogurt again. "Mr. Rowe told me."

"He told you?"

"Yeah."

"If he—what are you eating?"

"I didn't get dessert."

"I'm sorry?"

I had confused him, which happened quite a bit when you weren't used to following my fragmented train of thought. "I was out at dinner, and I didn't get dessert, so I wanted something sweet when

I got home, but all I have is yogurt."

"Do you want dessert?"

"Yeah." I smiled suddenly. "Oh, you wanna get pie with me?"

"Pie?"

I nodded, grinning wide. "C'mon, it's good." I grabbed his hand to tug him after me. "Just lemme grab my keys and we can—"

"Jory." He barked out my name, yanking on my hand to stop me, making me look at him. "Were you fired because of me?"

"No."

"Excellent, I was really worried that—"

"I was fired because Nora Talbot hates me," I said, chuckling, "and lied to my boss."

"Jesus. I—"

"But it's fine 'cause I'm gonna go work with Fal at Benchmark, but not for a month, but it was weird tonight, ya know, with my partner's boyfriend, so I wonder how—"

"Oh my God, talking to you is like—just come with me, and I'll take you for dessert, and we'll sit and talk, all right?"

"But I kinda want pie," I told him. "Can we have pie?"

"Sure," he sighed. "Just come with me."

"Okay." I smiled at him.

He just stared.

"What?"

He looked wrung out.

"I'm tiring, huh?"

Slow shake of his head. "No, not at all. I'm just... c'mon," he said, arm around my shoulders.

"Who told you where I live?" I asked him.

"No one."

"Then how'd you know?"

"I'm rich, Jory." He nodded, giving me a quick smile. "I have people that find people for me."

"That's cool," I said as we reached the door. "But you could've just called and I would have told you."

He squinted at me. "I know that and I should have."

I shrugged letting him know it was okay.

His car was downstairs, and as soon as we got in, I was meeting the driver. We shook hands, I asked him where his favorite pie place was, and told Charles, that was his name, where I thought they made the best Key lime. When I turned to look over my shoulder at Hayes, he had a bemused expression on his face.

"What?" I asked as I leaned back, slouching down next to him.

"No one ever talks to my driver."

"Why not? He's a cool guy."

"It just would never even cross their minds."

"Huh."

"I don't want pie," he confessed.

Which people lied about all the time and said they wanted when they really didn't. Only Sam loved it as much as me. "Okay, whaddya want, then?"

"Let me show you."

When we reached a bar/restaurant that I knew well, I thanked Charles for the ride and got out after Hayes. He put a hand on my shoulder and led me to the front door.

"They have good dessert here, Jory, and this way you can have a drink too."

I nodded, following after him as he led me to the front door.

Hayes asked the hostess to get the manager. I waited with him, not saying anything, just letting everything play out. When the manager arrived, Hayes told him who he was and explained that Carlo, the day manager, and he were very close friends. Jorge, the night manager, the man who was standing in front of us, didn't really give a damn.

"Listen—"

"Sir." Jorge cut Hayes off and used his hands to present, *ta-dah*, the waiting area.

"I really need you to—"

"Is Blanca here?" I cut in.

Both the manager and Hayes turned to me.

I smiled.

"Yes," Jorge told me. "Mrs. Saluda, the owner, is here, and you are?"

"Could you tell her that Jory's here?" I said, smiling at him. "I'd love to see her."

He squinted at me, but he left.

Hayes stepped around in front of me. "How do you know the owner of Town?"

I loved Town, it was one of my favorite places to go, and more importantly, it had been one of Dane's.

"Jory!"

I turned and there was Blanca, stunning, gorgeous, model, fashionista, and owner of the fine establishment I was in. She was also, crucially, at that moment, a very good client of an architect I shared a last name with.

"Darling!"

I lifted my arms and she came and filled them, hugging me tight, kissing both cheeks, and they were real, no air-kissing for Mrs. Saluda, before finally stepping back to look at me.

"As beautiful as ever."

"Right back at ya," I said with a grin, taking the hand she offered me.

"How is Dane?"

The million-dollar question.

"He's good, and you? How's Marco?"

"Excellent, he's in Milan buying fixtures for the roof lounge.

We should open on time in the fall. Did you get your invitation?"

"I did, yes, thank you."

She smiled, squeezing my hand. "But why are you here? Dinner? Dessert?"

"Dessert, please."

"And where—"

"In the kitchen, with you, of course."

Her smile, really, it was like watching chocolate melt, just perfect. The way she lit up was really something.

"This is my friend, Hayes Fisher," I said, introducing him to her.

"He wants to watch you make the flan too."

She was charmed, and he didn't have to say a word.

I could tell the man was touched. He sat in the bustling kitchen beside me at a table that most people never saw that was reserved for the most important patrons of Blanca's restaurant. She loved to cook, but no one but her family ever asked her. For Dane, she had shared the private part of herself, and because I had been with him, with me, as well. So I knew her secret, knew she loved to do for others, her establishment an extension of that.

We laughed, we had coffee with cocoa in it, and cinnamon with our flan. And she gave us tiramisu with pepper flakes that was amazing as well. It was sweet and hot and between Blanca smiling, me offering him a bite from my spoon, and the servers coming in and out, talking to us and taking swipes off our plates, I could tell that Hayes was having a great time.

"Is it always like this?" he asked me.

"What?"

"Being with you? Is it like being at the circus?"

"How do you mean?"

"Like you're working without a net?"

I was pretty sure it was not a compliment.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Chapter Seven

I WAS surprised when my phone rang early the following morning, and even more surprised to find that the same Shane McGill, Fallon Strauss's boyfriend, was on the other end inviting me out to lunch.

"I want to apologize for how I acted the other night, Jory, so if you would... could you meet me?"

"I would love that."

And it wasn't that we were going to be best friends, but he wanted to know me because he knew Fallon was going to be spending a lot of time with me, and he knew, too, that making it impossible for his boyfriend to mesh his work life and his private life was dangerous for the relationship.

"I want to share everything with Fallon."

I sighed deeply. "He has no idea how lucky he is."

"How do you mean?"

When I was all done explaining about being the husband of an undercover police detective, Shane's eyes were huge, and there was no more jealousy there, only sympathy. Later that afternoon, Fallon called me and told me that he was so thankful that I had been receptive to Shane's overture.

"Of course," I told him. "I want us to be partners and that means Shane too."

"I feel so much better."

And so did I. When I got off the phone with him, back on track for dinner on Saturday, I felt lighter. It was nice that Shane had made the effort for the man he loved; it was refreshing. I was surprised when I turned down my block to see the same Town Car from the night before. As I closed in on it, Hayes Fisher got out.

"Hey." I smiled and jogged over to the car.

"You gotta have dinner with me tonight," he told me, almost frantic.

"Why?"

"Because it's my mother's birthday, and if I don't show up at my brother Dave's house to celebrate with them, my father and everyone else will never forgive me, and I need a buddy to go with me and not take a date and just come with me," he ended with a rush.

I was confused.

"What?"

"Take a date."

"I don't have one, and going on a first date to your mother's birthday party in their home is awkward."

"So take one of your buddies."

"I don't want to. I need someone they've never met so they focus on getting to know you and don't ask me questions."

I squinted at him. "Why don't you wanna answer questions?"

"Just come on, get in the car."

"Tell me."

"I—Jory, there are things you don't know about my divorce."

"Like what?"

"Why do you care?"

"Why does it have to be me that goes?"

He stared at me.

I waited.

"I just, you're not afraid of pissing me off, and you speak your mind, and no one's given me so much crap in years."

"Why is that good?"

"It's different."

"So you want a friend who gives you shit."

He sighed. "I want a friend who is a friend and not somebody who wants to be my friend because I'm Hayes Fisher, heir to Fisher Ryson."

"I've never heard of Fisher Ryson."

"That's the parent company, Jory. The companies you've heard of are too many to list."

"So you're rich."

"Yep."

"Like, very?"

"Like, *very*."

"So why do you own that shitty house, then? Why not buy a mansion in Highland Park?"

"It's not a shitty house, and I happen to love Oak Park!"

"Why're you yelling at me?"

"I don't know," he said, exhaling sharply. "I think because I want you to like the house in Oak Park."

"Why does it matter?"

"I have no idea."

"Are you all right?" He seemed frantic.

"Will you just get in the car?"

"It's only two in the afternoon."

"Yeah, and my brother lives in Lake Forest, and I still have to get my mother a gift." He was exasperated. "So could we go?"

"I'm not dressed for a party."

"You look great. Corduroys and a sweater and the leather jacket, you're good. Let's just go."

"Don't you have a house to renovate?"

"Are you going to help me out or not?"

Of course I was. "Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Okay, let's go to your mother's birthday party."

Once we were inside the car, he turned to look at me.

I smiled at him. "Spit it out."

"No one has ever talked to me the way you talked to me that day at my house, Jory. When I was younger, no one was allowed to, and now, no one wants to be parted from my wallet."

I processed that. "So, what, are we buying your mother a castle?"

His smile made his pale blue eyes glint. "No, she likes special things, not extravagant. She likes it when people really think of her."

"I see."

"You have a thought?"

"I do."

THE house in Lake Forest was enormous, with a cobblestone circular drive and manicured grounds. There were tennis courts and stables, and, like, a ten-car garage that was heated. Amazing. We had to take a helicopter there, which was fun. I enjoyed the turbulence that made Hayes green, and once we were clear of the blades, I turned back to wave to Charles and then followed Hayes toward the house.

"How cool is it that your driver can drive anything? Can he drive a tank too?"

"Why did your mind go to tank?" he asked me.

"I just figured since you're rich you probably have a private army somewhere in the world."

He shook his head as he led me toward the house. Once inside, I realized that the place was a zoo. His mother's party was easily forty people big. But

it was an adult party, so when Hayes stepped away from me, telling me to wait, I went back to where I had spied the kids when we walked by them. They were on the other side of the great room, a boy on one couch, a little girl on the other. It was a big room, so it felt like they were in a completely different area from where the adults were gathered.

"Hey," the little boy said to me, all cocky bravado. He was modeling his snarky attitude after someone.

"Hey," I greeted him, turning to enter their area, drawn by the game they were playing on PlayStation 3, by the milk and cookies, and the newspaper. "What're you guys doing?"

He rolled his eyes the way only a little boy can, so bored, unable to suffer fools even at such an age. "My mom's late and my dad couldn't get a babysitter, so we had to come to Aunt Chloe's stupid party. And now Dad's gotta talk to everybody and keep checking on us... and that man with my dad blew off Becca, and she's all sad. But who cares, anyway?"

He did, obviously.

"It's just Becca's sad."

Second time he'd said it, so I understood that this was bothering him the most.

I turned and looked at the little girl and saw that she had the biggest brown eyes I had ever seen. Her chestnut curls were cut short in a pixie, so all you saw was a tiny face that was now a study in sadness.

"What happened, bunny?" I asked as I knelt down beside her.

Her eyes absorbed me. "The man said he would make a hat, but when Daddy came back, he didn't want to stay, and he went with him 'cause he likes him better, and I asked Daddy to make the hat, but he has to talk to Grandma and Grandpa and everybody else, and Scotty doesn't know how."

Scott was obviously her brother, the snarly thing sitting with her.

"Nobody can help me, and Mommy's late."

I nodded, sitting down beside the table. "Well, I can definitely make hats, but I can make frogs, too, and swans," I said, drawing out the last word.

"You wanna see?"

She was maybe five, and so because of that she was beside me so fast you would have thought I was covered in frosting or something. Ten minutes later, the boy was on the floor with his sister Rebecca and me, both of them in newspaper hats.

"Can you make airplanes, or what?"

"Uh, yeah," I said, equaling his snarky tone. "Better than anything you can make."

"I doubt it."

"Wanna bet?" I sassed him back.

"I'll bet you a million dollars."

I arched an eyebrow for him, and miracle of miracles, he smiled, huge. Same chestnut curls as his sister, but his eyes were hazel, not brown. They were both beautiful, and even though the little boy was trying not to like me, he was having a hard time. When I made the airplane sail from one end of the room to the other, he was impressed.

"Holy cow." His eyes were huge. "That was awesome."

"See," I told him, eating an Oreo, "told you."

"I'm Scott," he said with a smile, edging closer to me. "And that's my sister Becca."

I had collected that information previously, but it was nice that he was actually telling me. It was progress. "I'm Jory."

"Jory's a cool name." He nodded his approval. "It's a cowboy name."

"Thanks." I smiled back.

Becca was in my lap, so she tilted her head back and kissed my chin. Me and women, no matter the age, it was a given. She got more comfortable, nestling in against me as Scott called out for me to look at him as he sailed the airplane toward the sliding glass doors. When I looked up, I became aware of the man towering over me.

"Dad, look at this!"

He was staring at the little girl in my lap, and as hard as he tried to tear his eyes from her, he could not.

"Dad!"

Finally he wrenched his gaze away and watched the airplane float across the room on an unseen breeze for seconds before his gaze was once again on his girl.

"Hi, Dad." She smiled up at him, her fingers once again, for the hundredth time in the last hour, on my face.

He swallowed hard, his breath catching. "Hi, baby."

Instead of going to her father, she leaned tighter against me, and I felt her fingers fiddling with the collar of my sweater before she turned in my lap to face me.

"Jory."

I grinned at her. "Yes, ma'am."

Her fingers were now messing with the collar of the dress shirt I had on under the sweater. "I'm hungry."

I turned to look back up at her father. "She's hungry."

He nodded fast and kneeled down beside me, his hand on my shoulder as he looked into my eyes. "I'm David, David Fisher, who are you?"

"Jory Harcourt. I came with Hayes."

He nodded, emerald eyes locked on mine as his hand, which he hadn't withdrawn, slid higher on my shoulder, fingers grazing the side of my neck. "I hope my kids weren't—"

"Oh, no, it's fine. I enjoyed hangin' with them. Maybe they could get something to eat? I don't know what time their bed—"

"It's gonna be a late night," he told me, looking back at his daughter. "And they're stuck here, anyway, and I don't want to put them to bed only to have to wake them when their mother finally arrives."

I waited because I could tell there was more.

"Rebecca is usually really shy, and," he cleared his throat before saying, "she's usually shy."

"Baby?"

We all turned to look at the stunning, model-perfect blond-haired, blue-eyed man standing there looking down at us.

"Honey, Tim and Monica are here, come say hello."

David looked over his shoulder. "I'll be right there."

"But," he said, trying to smile, "they just got here, and they don't know any
—"

"What did I say?" he asked flatly, his voice icy.

The man nodded, his eyes flicking to me. "Okay, I'll go get them, and then I can make Becca the hat I prom—"

"Jory made me a swan." She held it up so the man could see before turning her big anime eyes to her father. "You can go talk to Auntie Monica and Uncle Tim, Daddy. Jory will stay with us."

David Fisher's eyes moved from his daughter to me, to his son and then back to me. I had turned from his penetrating gaze when my shoulder was tapped. I found Scott looking at me.

"Jory, can you play Tekken?"

"Yessir, I can."

Scott held out the wireless controller to me. "Can you do this part of the campaign? I can't beat this guy."

"Sure, lemme—"

"Could you sit over here?"

By him. He wanted me right next to him. It was very cute.

"Come over there by you?" I teased him. "Are ya sure?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Okay."

Becca got up and then I did, walking around the coffee table, and when I sat down, she climbed right back into my lap. Scott scooted close, his hand on my thigh as he looked at the screen.

"Do you wanna see Jamie?" she asked me.

"Aww, c'mon, Bec," Scott grumbled, "Jory doesn't wanna see your lame doll."

"I do, though," I said, kissing the top of her head.

"I put her to sleep in Grandma's bed."

"Well go wake her up," I suggested.

Her face, the beaming smile I got was something to see. She hopped off my lap and was gone seconds later.

"You know the doll's not really alive," Scott assured me.

"Yeah buddy, I know," I said just as seriously.

He brightened suddenly. "Do you wanna see one of my karate trophies? I let Grandma keep one here."

"Absolutely," I told him as I used Nina, one of the girls, to destroy the big guy he'd been trying to kill for an hour.

"That was so fast." He was in awe; his eyes were wide with it.

I waggled my eyebrows for him.

"You know all Nina's moves?"

"Yep," I teased him.

After a second he shrugged, which was as close to respect, albeit grudging, that I was going to get.

"I'll be right back, 'kay? Don't leave," he said, and then he too was gone.

I looked up at David Fisher. "Can I make them something to eat? Would that be okay?"

He pressed his lips together as he took a step closer. "You're thinking poorly of me, but I assure you that I'm not the father you think I am. I expected my ex-wife three hours ago. She's not normally late. I don't normally have my kids during the week, but it's my mother's birthday and Derek is not—"

"I don't think anything," I said, smiling at him. "I swear. Just wanna feed the kids if that's cool."

His sigh coupled with the resigned smile was endearing. "It's fine, but I just want you to know that there are easily five to ten odd circumstances about this night that have created what you're seeing here."

"Okay."

"I just...." He inhaled deeply. "I don't like my kids around my dates until ___"

"You're serious so they don't get attached."

"Yes."

"I've dated men with children in the past. I get it."

We just stared at each other as the kids flew back into the room.

"Jory, look at Jamie."

The doll was one of those creepy ones with the eyes that opened and closed. She looked like she belonged in a Hitchcock movie. The karate trophy was easier to be excited about, and I realized what had taken so long was that Scott had changed into his gi, proudly showing off his yellow belt.

I watched as he demonstrated his moves and clapped hard when he was done and doing the special bow his sensei had taught him. I even whistled.

"You carry that thing with ya wherever you go?" I gestured at the gi. "So you can change into it like Spiderman?"

"I had practice today after school."

I shrugged. "Would've been cooler if you just went with it."

He nodded coolly.

"I'm hungry," Becca said again.

I looked up at David. "You said it was okay if I feed them, right?"

"Oh, no, you don't have to do—"

"I don't mind," I assured him, "if it's fine with you."

"It's fine with me, but we have a whole buffet out there to—"

"It's gross." Scott made retching noises for me just in case I missed the disgust in his voice.

Becca took my hand and led me forward, chattering on about Jamie and how they had gone horseback riding the day before. Scott was doing his lunges beside us, breathing out sharply, making the "hai" sound the whole way.

The kitchen was almost bigger than my last apartment. You could play dodge ball in it.

"I want eggs," Becca whined. "Please, Jory."

"I want macaroni," Scott told me between punching his fists in the air.

I made both because it was easy. Becca got scrambled eggs with grated cheese on top, with a side of peeled apples, and I made macaroni and cheese from scratch for Scott. He had no idea that mac and cheese could be made on the stove and not in a microwave.

"My grandmother made it like this," I told him.

He was leery, but it smelled good, so he tried it. As I was washing the dishes, Becca told me that her daddy let them ride in the long hallway. I had no idea what she meant until Scott explained it to me.

It reminded me of those stories about Versailles from French class in high school. How the halls in the palace were so wide that Louis XIV used to have fox hunts inside. I understood how David could allow his children to race around his home. Becca had a tricycle, Scott had a scooter, and I got his skateboard. Riding a bike comes right back the second you climb on, and lucky for me, so did gliding over marble on a skateboard.

Becca's squeals of delight were the best thing I had heard in weeks. Scott's laughter was loud, and when I did the spin for him on the back wheels, the way he looked at me, eyes wide and dancing, like I was Tony Hawk, made me smile. What had started as speculative had become friendly. He liked me. But I liked him back, and he could probably tell.

We were taking a break, finishing the cleanup in the kitchen, when there was a shriek of joy from Becca.

"Mommy!"

I turned in time to see a very elegant-looking woman wrapped in a long mink coat crossing the room toward us.

"I see you have helpers." She smiled at me as David appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, ma'am, and very excellent ones, I might add."

She nodded, taking in her son on my right drying the dishes, her daughter on my left, sitting on the counter, drying the pans.

"What did they eat?"

Before I could explain, Scott ran down my culinary skills for her, explaining about the epiphany of cooking pasta instead of nuking it, and

how Becca had eaten apples.

"You hate apples," she reminded her daughter.

"But Jory cut off the skin and let me put them in peanut butter."

Her eyes were all over me as she strode forward, her hand extended. I rinsed off the soap, dried my hands on the dish towel, and took her offered hand.

"Elsa Fisher," she said, smiling at me.

I smiled back. "Jory Harcourt."

Her eyes locked on mine.

I arched an eyebrow for her.

"How do you know David?"

"I don't. I know Hayes."

She let out a long drawn-out sigh as she decided right then and there that she liked me. "I look forward to seeing more of you, Jory."

But I doubted that she would.

"Wait... Harcourt?"

"Yep." I grinned. "Dane Harcourt is my brother."

Her eyes went round. "I met him at a charity auction two weeks ago. He was very gracious and generous to our cause."

"And what is that?"

"I'm a docent at the children's art museum."

I nodded. "Well, Dane loves kids."

"Does he have any of his own?"

"His wife is due in June."

"Oh." Her face fell. "How wonderful for them."

"Did you meet his wife Aja?" I asked.

"No, he was alone."

So she had thought, just like I was sure a lot of women had, that him flying solo meant something, when in reality, it meant nothing. Aja didn't like to have Dane go to functions alone, and the reverse was true, as well, but it was just sometimes necessary.

"You two look nothing alike."

And that was because Dane Harcourt and I were not related by any blood at all. I had worked for the man for five years, and somewhere along the way I had gone from assistant to friend to the person he wanted to have for a brother. He was an orphan, so was I, and so when he had said that he didn't want me to work for him anymore, but he did want me in his life for always, I had discarded my old last name and taken Harcourt. And now, after six, close to seven years, I felt as though I had been born with the name.

"Except that you're both just stunning."

"Thank you," I sighed, looping back into the conversation, reaching out to squeeze her arm so she never knew I had sort of checked out in the middle and run fast to catch up.

She patted my hand and then turned and told her kids that it was time to go. I lifted Becca off the counter and went down on one knee so she could wrap her arms around me and kiss and hug me good-bye.

The head buried in the side of my neck let me know that we were pals. Scott gave me a big hug I wasn't expecting, arms tight around my neck, and then both of them trailed after their mother out of the kitchen. I was hanging up the towels when I heard a throat clearing behind me. I found myself alone with David Fisher.

"Come join the adults now. My mother is opening her gifts."

"Sure."

He held the swinging door open for me, and then I followed him out into the enormous living room. Everyone was clustered around a beautiful woman holding court. She was opening gifts, but her eyebrows were scrunched. I moved across the floor and over to her so she had to tip her head back, since she was sitting.

"If you tell me where some paper and pen is, ma'am, I'll be your secretary and make a list of your haul for ya."

"How did you know? I didn't even—"

"I was a personal assistant for five years, and my boss was big on the nonverbal cues as well."

Her eyes were soft as she looked up at me. "Well, thank you, dear, in the desk drawer in the foyer should be a pad and your choice of pen."

I went to get what she needed, and when I got back, she gestured for me to sit down beside her.

"Who are you?" She smiled at me, her lovely clear blue eyes glinting in the light.

"I'm Jory. I came with Hayes." I tipped my head at the man looking stunned sitting across the room from me.

"And I didn't get an introduction why?" she asked, turning to Hayes.

"He was cooking and entertaining your grandchildren," David chimed in.

"Was he?" Her eyes were warm. "Well, I'm Libby Fisher."

"Pleasure," I said, grinning. "So what'd ya get?"

"Well, so far," she began, pointing to things, calling them out to me as I wrote them down and took the cards she passed over.

When she got to the box from Hayes, she was genuinely touched at the scarf inside.

"My goodness, Hayes, and my favorite colors too," she said, beaming at her son. "I love it."

And she had the newest iPad and jewelry and tickets for a cruise and many more things that made my brain spin, but the scarf she put on and patted over and over. When I got back from the kitchen where the garbage bags were, to help clean up the paper, Libby reached for my hand and stopped me from moving.

"Ma'am?"

"Libby."

I smiled at her. "Libby."

"Hayes says that it was your idea for the scarf. How did you know I'd love it?"

"It's getting a little colder, but not cold enough for a muffler, but Chanel, with fall colors...." I arched an eyebrow for her. "C'mon.

And I figured if your coloring was anywhere near his... we've got this right?"

She was enchanted with me. It happened sometimes. "Did you eat?"

"Not yet."

"Come with me."

I was filling a plate from the buffet table, with Libby supervising, when the door chimed and more people showed up.

When she left, David was there.

"I wanted to thank you for being nice to my kids, Jory."

"You don't hafta thank me for that. They're great kids. Their mom is kinda cool too."

He nodded. "The reasons being obvious for the divorce—you've met Derek. I had no idea that Hayes and I were the same way."

"Both gay, ya mean?"

"I—"

"Say gay, man," I told him, talking like a high-end fashion photographer ordering around models. "Spit it out. Nothin' to be embarrassed about. Own it."

He stared at me.

I cackled evilly.

"It's not—"

"I haven't met your father, but your mother could care less."

"She used to."

"Who cares about used to?" I pointed out.

He was staring at me when Hayes joined us.

"You ditched me," he said flatly.

"Because his kids were more fun," I told him, chuckling as I moved around the two brothers to find a seat in the dining room.

I introduced myself to the others at the table, Hayes's sister Jane, her husband Marc, and various cousins, spouses, and finally, the family patriarch. I rose to shake William Fisher's hand, and he gave me the two-handed shake and smiled a real one.

"Pleasure. Jory what?"

"Harcourt."

"Harcourt?"

I sighed and smiled. "Yep, Dane Harcourt's brother."

And he was impressed, because in Dane's reflected glow, I was golden.

I took the tour of the house with William after dinner and got him talking, showing me his collection of antique revolvers, listening to family history, and finally ending up looking at the pictures along the stairs.

He left me in the game room with the girls, the teens and tweens. There were five of them in all, and I showed them how fast the dance club party game on the Wii was supposed to be played.

There were squeals of delight when two of their mothers poked their heads in an hour later. I talked them both into trying, and no matter what, no matter how old, when parents join in with their kids, they love it. Making fun of their moms was fun, and the laughter from the women was nice.

"Oh, Jory," Jillian Fisher cooed, hugging me tight. "When are you coming back?"

The second time I hit the buffet, I had all five girls in tow. We talked about boys and I looked at pictures on phones, and when Libby and William

started dancing on the patio by the pool, I asked one of the girls, Andrea, if she'd like to join me.

"Oh, Jory, I can't dance," she told me.

But I led her out beside her grandparents, had her put her hand on my shoulder, put a hand on her waist, and showed her simple steps before asking her to follow my lead. In twenty minutes, we were moving pretty well. There was no glide, but she was thrilled. When I dipped her, there was applause. She blushed bright red, but it was easy to see the happy there too.

When I was getting some water afterward, Hayes came up beside me.

"Hey," I said, smiling at him.

"Okay, so now that you've completely charmed my family, what's your plan, here?"

"I'm sorry?"

"David just asked me how serious it was with us because he'd really like to ask you out."

"What about Derek?"

"Why are you asking that?"

I yawned. "I dunno, seemed polite."

"Well," he said, his voice lowering as he stepped closer, his eyes all over my face. "Apparently Derek's appeal has waned now that he's met you."

"Huh."

"I told him that if anyone in this family is dating you that it's going to be me."

"What happened with your divorce?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yep. Tell me about the divorce."

"Fine, what do you want to know?"

"You got a divorce because you figured out that you weren't bi, huh, you were just gay."

He just stared at me before he reached out and put a hand on the side of my neck.

"And you were scared to come out because David already was and you were worried that two gay sons would freak the folks out, since he had kind of a rough time with them at first."

"How do you—"

"But now they're fine with it, they just want you to be happy, and they see that David's okay so you will be too."

"Jory—"

"So is that it? Or is there more to the divorce drama?"

"Jory," he said after a long silence. "How did you get all of... who told you what... just from being here tonight?"

"I ask a lot of questions," I told him. "So all your secrets might be stuff you're keeping out of the tabloids, but it's pretty tame in my world."

"Oh yeah? You're a badass, are you?" He asked a taunting question, but his tone was nowhere near that. In fact his voice was low and deep as his thumb slid up under my chin.

I took a step back out of his grip. He was a nice man, his brother was nice, too, but I didn't do gentle, sweet, easy-going guys. Only growling alpha

males did it for me. I was more likely to sleep with Cristo Liron than—"Crap." I jolted, realizing that my fantasies were starting to flesh themselves out.

"Jory?"

"I gotta go," I told him, turning to jog through the living room to the coat closet in the foyer.

As I pulled on my jacket, Hayes stepped in front of me, blocking me in.

"What are you doing?"

"I do this sometimes," I told him, taking a breath. "I give people the wrong impression."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I can't date you or your brother. And your brother is looking for someone who gets that his kids are great, not me specifically. And you're lookin' for *the* guy, and that's not me, either.

I would, however, mention to the people at Synergy that you're gay, 'cause as far as I know, they're looking for a woman for you."

"What?" He was trying to absorb everything I'd said at once.

"Synergy," I reiterated, talking slow, "only finds girls."

"Jory—"

"So you should break it to them pretty soon that you're lookin' for a dude."

His mouth opened as I stepped around him and walked out the front door.

On the porch, I could breathe, and then I realized I was in Lake Forest. I had to think.

"Jory," Hayes said as he came out behind me.

But my brain was consumed with the logistics of getting home as I started across the driveway.

"Jory!"

I waited.

He moved fast around in front of me, barring my path. "Are you just going to leave and not say good-bye to my family and just—"

"Tell them I had a family emergency, but Hayes...." I sighed deeply. "It's not fair for me to spend a second longer here. What's the point of them liking me? We're not gonna be friends. If I was single, we could date, but —"

"You're not single?"

I held up my left hand for him. "Married."

"To who?" He was aghast.

"Sam Kage, he's a cop."

"Where is he?"

"Working undercover."

"I—"

"I'll see you," I said, turning to walk quickly down the driveway. On the street I realized that I had no earthly idea where I was or how to get home. I walked down one street and then another and finally turned onto a street where there was some traffic and restaurants. Crossing it, I walked into the lobby of an inn and asked the concierge on duty where I could get a cab back to Chicago.

"You know that's gonna cost you like a million dollars, right?"

But I deserved to learn a lesson for my stupidity. Dane was always telling me the things I couldn't and shouldn't do with Sam being gone, and I finally understood what he was saying. I was not a catch or a prize, but I had some good qualities and maybe someone other than Sam Kage would want to keep me if I offered. The thing was, I wasn't offering, so to make it seem as though I was, was not fair.

"Yeah, I know." I smiled at the nice lady. "That's okay."

She shrugged and called me a cab.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Chapter Eight

DANE had invited me to lunch, and after my two-hundred-dollar cab ride the night before, I needed to eat for free a little. Plus, being in his office was fun. It was new, the place where I used to work for him now long gone. You rode up the elevator in the building downtown and when you reached his floor, it opened into the lobby of the office he shared with Sherman Cogan and Miles Brown. It used to be, you got off the elevator and had a choice of where to go, but now they had the whole floor, and it was all polished wood and glass, and basically you felt like you were in a house instead of an office. The exposed pipes in the ceiling, the fans, the dark colors, and the large windows all gave off a feeling of warmth and elegance.

I had worked for Dane for five years in the office he shared with Miles Brown and Sherman Cogan, and so I knew the two other assistants, Celia and Jill. My friend Piper used to be the receptionist, but she had quit after her second child was born. So now there was a new receptionist at the front desk, and Dane had another new assistant—he went through them sort of fast—a secretary who maintained his correspondence, and a field liaison. I used to be the only one he had working for him besides a typist since I could do, maybe, on a good day, thirty words a minute.

So I had come in, left my name with the receptionist as just Jory, and sat down to wait. She had asked, "Jory what, with whom?"

But I said, "Just Jory," and sat. She did not approve of me, I could tell.

Dane's assistant, Brooke Jessup, came out to see what I needed.

She had worked for him for six weeks.

"Hi," she said indulgently, forcing a smile. "May I help you?"

"Yeah, I'm here to have lunch with your boss."

"Oh"—furrowed brows—"is he aware that he's—"

"Yeah, he knows. He called me." I smiled at her.

"I see, and you are?"

"Jory," I chuckled. "Harcourt."

Her eyes got big. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. You're his cousin?"

"Brother." I grinned, stepping around her. "Is he in his office?"

"Yes, but he's with Adam, his other assistant."

"That's okay," I said, walking down the hall toward his door.

"I really think—"

And I stopped when I heard the yell.

"Oh God," she groaned, "see?"

I waited with Brooke, and after a minute of silence, I opened the door.

"Brooke!" Dane said sharply. "How many times have I—Oh, hey."

I stepped inside, and a guy I had never seen before in my life was putting things on Dane's desk: an iPhone, keys, a fob, and a credit card. I understood at once.

"Dane, I—"

"Thank you, Mr. Taylor, that will be all."

He trembled. "I just needed to—"

"Thank you, Mr. Taylor."

He took a breath, turned, looked at me for the very first time, and then walked toward Brooke.

"If you could have my things sent to—"

"He fired you?" She was aghast. "For dinner? He fired you for dinner?"

"Don't," I cautioned her fast.

Her eyes flicked to mine.

"Just don't say anything."

"Ms. Jessup."

I winced, because it had been Brooke a minute ago, just as I was sure it had been Adam yesterday. Dane always added the article in front of your name when you were no longer in his employ.

"You may also see yourself out. Please leave all possessions of Harcourt, Brown, and Cogan on your desk and report, along with Mr. Taylor, to Melody Bruce's office on LaSalle at Watts and Gardner.

I'll call ahead and make sure she sees you promptly. Mr. Taylor has the address."

"What?"

"Thank you, Ms. Jessup."

"Oh, no, Dane, I—"

"Thank you."

He had turned his back on both of them; all you saw was the way the expensive wool suit looked like it had been handmade for him to cut across his broad shoulders, wide back and narrow waist.

You noticed his height, the way the jet-black hair tapered to above his collar and how glossy it was as it caught the light. He was perfect and cold, and the waves of anger were flowing off of him.

"Come here."

She moved.

I stopped her, crossing the room fast. "He means me."

As soon as I reached his side, I heard him breathe. The phone on his desk rang, and I answered it.

"Dane Harcourt's office."

I looked at Brooke as I spoke, answered the questions about a vendor that I knew the answer to because I had answered it a million times, thanked the person on the other end, and hung up. I then took a seat at Dane's desk, pulled up his schedule on his computer, and picked up the phone.

"You're his brother that used to be his assistant," Brooke said.

"I only have one brother," he said from behind me.

But he didn't, not really. The man had two biological brothers as

well as a sister, and I was the one who wasn't really related to him, but to Dane, I was the one and only. He had picked me; the others were thrust on him.

"I was his assistant, yes." I smiled at her. "Please leave everything on your desk, Brooke. Don't lock your files, and is your laptop here at the office?"

"Yes, it's—"

"I need it now, please."

"But I have some personal—"

"There should be no personal files on the company laptop.

That's why you were given the removable hard drive when you started. But along with your check tomorrow, you will receive, on a CD, any personal files that are currently on the laptop." I had given the spiel many times over the years and still had it mostly committed to memory. "All passwords and locks are changed the minute someone leaves, so please do not return in hopes of gaining access to the building. You will be placed on restricted status from this site for a period of two months, and if you have other business in this building, you will need to provide the security guards downstairs with a written document to be allowed entry."

"I—"

"What were you asked when you started here, Brooke?"

"I'm sorry?" She was stunned, and I just needed to help her understand what was happening so she could wrap her brain around things.

"You were asked the same question I was, would your loyalty be to the man or the firm? What was your answer?"

"The man."

"Just like mine." I smiled. "But what did you do today?"

"I don't—"

"You put Adam's needs before Dane's. Good day, Ms. Jessup."

She looked up at Dane's back. He was a one-shot guy, and it was bad and pious and rigid, but he had to really count on you and really believe that

there was no way you would ever let him down.

Dane led with his heart, and when that faith was tested and failed, he always backed off to Bermuda. He pulled away so fast you were in a tailspin. How could he be there, be a rock in your life, this unmovable force, and then just be gone? But what she didn't know was that there had been other chances for her not to fail him. And six weeks seemed tiny, was tiny, but to Dane... it was all or nothing. He was like that with everything, love or hate, black or white; there was no gray in the man except his eyes.

She left quickly, following after Adam Taylor.

I took a breath. "I'm off for a month—well, three weeks, now—but I'll take care of you for that time. I'll be here tomorrow, and you should let me hire the next two people."

"I didn't need more than you and a typist when you were here," he grumbled from behind me.

"Your client list was smaller."

"Doubtful."

"You weren't married then and about to be a father. Your private life is more precious now, and so your scheduling is tighter to make sure you're home to see your wife, make sure you get to Lamaze class."

He grunted.

"Did Mr. Taylor take clients out on the company card?"

"Potential clients."

"Translated: people he wanted to impress or fuck."

"Tactlessly put, but yes."

I turned in his chair. "Let's go eat, your blood sugar is dipping, you're being an ass."

"Me? Did you hear her?"

"Yes, I heard." I smiled. "She has no idea that there's cash and prizes for the assistant that can put up with your crap."

"You're the only one who's ever been able to be the assistant I needed."

"Yeah, well, it's because you're annoying, but I sort of like you."

He sighed deeply.

"How 'bout Japanese. I'll take you for sushi and miso soup."

"All right, let me get my coat."

"But you gotta buy." I yawned, e-mailing his schedule to my phone. "What is this? Why do you have a three thirty and a four?"

"What?" he grumbled.

"I'll fix it," I told him, downloading all his contact numbers back into my phone as well.

"Why am I buying?" He was putting on his wool and cashmere topcoat, adjusting the sleeves. "You could buy."

"Nope, not after the cab ride from Lake Forest back here."

"I'm sorry?"

I looked at his schedule. "Okay, so long lunch, and I have a ton of shit to tell you."

"Good," he breathed out. "I want to hear."

We walked how we always walked, his hand on the back of my neck, gently steering, making sure, since I was an idiot, after all, that I knew where I was going.

He hated firing people. It took a lot out of him, but it was always necessary for him because his expectations were too high. And people could never say, "You expect too much for what you pay," because the man paid his assistant a small fortune. So it was good that he had lunch with me because he needed to decompress and eat good food and not have to worry for even a second what he sounded like or didn't, or if he yelled.

I explained about Hayes Fisher and his brother David and Cristo Liron, and how I was sorry that I hadn't listened to him, but when had I ever? And why in the hell did he think I was going to suddenly start now?

"Jory—"

"Drink your soup."

And he took direction like he never did and sipped his soup while he gave me instructions.

"You have to look like you belong there when you come to the office tomorrow."

Meaning, I had to look pretty. "I know."

"Are you going to put an ad in the paper?"

"No, I'm gonna call around first and see who knows somebody."

And you don't need two people. You need one plus your secretary."

"I fired my secretary last week."

"For crissakes, Dane."

"She said she needed more."

"More what?"

"More from me. She said that she could make me happy."

"Uh-huh." I nodded. "So what she really needed were some good antipsychotic drugs and therapy."

"Indeed."

"Huh."

He cleared his throat.

"It's 'cause you're so mysterious."

He rolled his eyes. "My wife needs to know that I have good people around me, not people who want to take her place in my life."

"You've always insisted on not letting me hire someone. I mean, you let me weed through applications with you, but you never let me sit in when you hired someone."

"Well, now I'm going to try letting you find the right person."

"Good. In the meantime, I'll come home with you tonight and tell Aja I'm gonna be there until you find someone."

His smile was the one hardly anyone but me and Aja and a few close friends ever saw. It was the real Dane, stripped down, vulnerable, with the soft eyes and the curl of his lip that made your stomach twist with the trust of seeing it.

"Don't worry."

"I'm not, anymore. My only concern is you."

"Why?"

"Let's talk about Cristo Liron."

I couldn't even say it didn't concern him, because I had basically made it his business with my earlier confession.

I didn't get home until after nine, having put in the rest of my day with Dane, sorting through files and appointments to get a handle on his office again. Had to find the copy room and upload his schedule into Outlook and the myriad of tasks that went into being his assistant. I sent him home before me, bowing out of dinner with he and Aja, letting him give her the news that I was stepping in, for the interim, as his assistant.

As I walked toward my apartment, I saw the Town Car from the previous evening. Charles was inside the car, and when I waved, he lifted his hand from the steering wheel as Hayes Fisher got out.

"Hi," I greeted him.

"Jory, I've been calling you all day."

And I knew he had, but I had ignored it.

"What the hell was that all about last night?"

"I'm sorry," I apologized, moving closer, hands in the pocket of my peacoat. "I just... the way I figure things out they kind of just hit me, you know? I get blindsided and when that happens, I just dig out."

It's a bad habit, but see I had no idea you were interested in me until last night. I really thought you just wanted to hang out."

"I do."

I shook my head. "You don't. You wanna come upstairs and get in my bed. I'm slow, but not stupid."

He took a settling breath. "Just come get a drink with me."

"Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you, and I know you won't let me come up."

"We have nothing to talk about," I assured him. "Sex is a dead issue."

"Then come hang out with my friends and me. We were planning on going to a club tonight. Doesn't dancing sound like fun?"

"You dance?"

"Why are you squinting at me." He was indignant. "I can dance."

But he didn't even have good music in his crappy house.

"Jory, just... c'mon, let's start over. I need friends, all right?

God, do I."

"You could buy some."

"That's a really shitty thing to say."

And it was. "Sorry."

"Please get in the car."

I got in the car.

THE club was a techno wonderland of light and sound. The dance floor was huge, but the crowd was still crushed together in sweaty, hungry heat, and I could feel the throb of the music inside my skin.

There was no way to talk; it was too loud. So I met Hayes's friends with handshakes and hugs before he pulled me after him into the press of bodies. Even without benefit of him touching me, he was basically shoved into me as we swayed from side to side with everyone else.

When he put his hands on my hips, I shook my head and started back through the press of skin to the table. I did not expect to be grabbed and swung around.

"What are you doing?" Hayes yelled at me.

"I need to go," I told him. It was another stupid decision on my part. "This doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like friends."

"Jory," he began.

I turned, and when I did, I was suddenly face to face with Cristo Liron.

"I thought you didn't date?" he said, and even as loud as he had to yell the accusation, I still heard how low and icy it was.

I flipped him off, stepped around him, and would have headed toward the coat room, but he grabbed my arm and yanked me back hard.

"No one blows me off."

Power had to be exerted so I could free myself from his grip, and when I did, I shoved my way through the dancers until I was at the edge of the floor. Moving fast, I made it to the coat room. The girl I had left my jacket with earlier was still wading through the stack.

My peacoat had not even been hung up yet, and so I saved her the hassle of finding a hanger.

Instead of going out the front, I headed for the back to leave.

There were rooms that needed to be passed, and it was dark, barely lit, and the smell and the sounds let me know what was going on even if the positions did not. There were lots of guys on their knees, many being fucked against walls, noisy and messy and loud. I was moving fast, feeling frantic, and when I became aware that someone was behind me, I sped up.

But it was too late.

Grabbed hard, stuffed through a door into a tiny room, I was whirled around and thrown up against a wall. I prepared to defend myself.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill you," he rasped, the whispered words sounding like a roar to me.

I froze, my breath catching as half his face came out of the darkness, smoky-blue eyes glinting in the low light, blazing with fury.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing going out to a—"

"Sam," I breathed his name, lunging at him, arms around his neck, pressing into him as tight as I could, my body heating instantly with the contact. The man was massive, covered in hard muscle, and I wanted to touch all of him as fast as I could.

His big strong hands were on my ass, lifting me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, writhing, grinding, and pushing my groin into his abdomen.

"Tell me," he demanded, his voice harsh, angry, even as he tugged at my belt.

I whimpered as I was manhandled, the jingle of buckle, the tug of button then zipper, and I felt the air on my leaking cock.

"Fuckin' tell me!"

"You know me," I answered breathlessly. "Put me against the wall. Please."

"Fuck no," he snarled before he tilted my chin up and sealed his hot mouth to mine.

Oh God, kissing Sam Kage. Had I missed anything more? Ever?

I devoured his mouth, sucking, licking, biting, and even in my own frenzy I realized that I was being kissed back with equal passion, equal need.

I was aware of a sound like foil, and then slippery fingers slid between my cheeks, parting them as a slick coolness grazed my entrance. Lube. He had lube for me, and my heart stopped as I whimpered with happiness. Spit would have worked for me, it hardly mattered, but for whatever reason, Sam Kage was carrying around lube. Sam was....I stiffened suddenly, involuntarily as my mind raced with the implications of that.

"You idiot, I had it for you—who the fuck else?" he scolded me.

Best part about being part of a couple, your partner could read your mind. I went boneless in his arms, and when my jeans and underwear were roughly shucked off, leaving me naked from the waist down, I begged him to hurry.

I was lifted, slammed back into the wall and held there as I felt the first press of the head of his engorged penis at my entrance.

"Sam," I cried out, trying to push down, trying to impale myself on the thick, velvety length of him that I knew so well.

"I wanna hear it."

This, then, was the reason for the ambush. Sam Kage was normally very self-possessed. He didn't engage in self-doubt, he didn't rattle, but seeing me first with Cristo and then a second time with him, and now it looked like I was out at a club—which I was, but not how he thought—I was probably freaking him out. And he would never blow his cover or act in a non-responsible ethically and morally way, but he was manhandling me because if he didn't, it would eat him up. Sam needed to know that everything at home was solid, so then he could go out into the world with his armor in place.

I had forgotten that. I had forgotten that I was the man's home. I made him indestructible.

"Jory!"

As I had been working things out, he was slowly dying inside, I saw it in his eyes. "There will never be anyone but you, Sam, you know that. How could there be?"

His very satisfied male grunt rose from his chest as he drove up into me at the same time I pushed down. And he was huge, and I was tight, and I would have yelled the walls down if he hadn't drowned the noise with a kiss.

It felt like my flesh was on fire, the burn was incredible, the rings of muscle breached without warning or foreplay. When he eased out, I hissed with the pain as he thrust back in even deeper.

I couldn't breathe. My whole world was sharp, stinging, piercing heat. And then he fisted my shaft and tugged from balls to head as he again eased free. My body relaxed for a heartbeat before his hips snapped forward and he plunged inside again. As his enormous cock filled me, dragging over sensitized skin, scraping my prostate, I shuddered with the feel of him.

"Jory," he gasped my name, holding me on the wall as he pounded in and out of me, setting a savage tempo as he ravaged me.

My body, which had wanted him out, welcomed him in, opened, and held tight, my muscles bearing down, clenching, as he fucked me hard.

"You feel so good," he panted as he buried himself in my ass.

He made my body remember what it was for. His touch on my skin, his breath on my face, his smell, all of it so desperately needed, so utterly wanted.

It took only seconds, and I was so ready, so aching and on edge, thrumming with pent-up desire, all of it for him, waiting for him, and now unleashed.

"Sam, I'm gonna come," I moaned, my voice cracking, broken.

He grabbed my cock hard, jerking me off, and his hand over my mouth muffled the sounds I was making as my body surrendered to the man I loved. I spurted over his hand, wrist, and shirt. I came hard and long as he rammed in and out of me, never stopping, never slowing, riding out the aftershocks that triggered his own searing orgasm. He spilled into my passage, filling me, overflowing me, and I felt the thick, hot liquid rolling down my thighs. But he continued his deep in and out plunge, and I felt how deep he was inside me, my hole stretched to accommodate his length and hardness.

"You're mine," he told me as he reclaimed my mouth, making sure I knew who I belonged to.

I was trembling hard, arms and legs wrapped around him as he finally stilled, making no move to pull out, the kiss no longer punishing, gentling, easing to slow and sensual as he sucked on my tongue.

"Jory," he finally gasped, lips hovering over mine.

"Come home and talk to me."

"Yes."

"Tonight," I pleaded as I ran my tongue over his bottom lip.

He whimpered in the back of his throat.

The sound—that I could make him do that, big strong man that he was—was so hot.

"Please."

"I swear."

"Sam?"

He lifted me and pulled out fast, making me gasp with the loss of fullness, the quickness and ferocity of the movement.

"Get the fuck home," he ordered but didn't move.

The effort it was taking for him to remain in the guise of the man he was supposed to be and not simply be Sam, my Sam, showed all over his face. He wanted to hold me, to wrap his arms around me and crush me tight and not let go. The way he leaned, like he wanted to kiss me but did not complete the motion, made me sad for him.

This was the problem with breaking the rules, having contact with people you loved while you were undercover—they stripped away the façade.

His eyes, the smoky blue I loved, flicked to mine, held, and then he was gone, leaving me alone and dripping with his spend, half naked and shaking.

I needed to leave, but I had to pull myself together first. When I could finally stand, I put on my briefs and jeans, and then retrieved my boot from under a table I had not noticed before. As I made my way toward the door, Cristo suddenly appeared in it.

His eyes were hard.

I was not in the mood. Sam never left me after sex. He held me so tight and fell asleep beside me. To be abandoned was brand new, and I felt raw.

"So you're not the man I thought you were. You tell me you don't fuck around on your man, and yet here you are, and you reek of sweat and sex, and we both know you fucked some stranger in here."

"And? So?"

"So if you were gonna fuck someone, it should've been me," he yelled, grabbing hold of my sweater, yanking me forward, his breath hot in my face.

I tore free of his grip, shoving him off me, and bolted by him and down the hall. It was good that he had no idea that I had been with Sam, but it really

did make me look like a whore. The thought of what was true and what looked real haunted me all the way home.

CHAPTER
NINE

Chapter Nine

I SHOWERED, and under the hot water, I calmed, settled. I changed into pajama bottoms, and I was standing in the kitchen, looking out the window, when the front door was hurled open and Sam Kage came through it. My eyes were all over him, the jeans, the cotton T- shirt stretched across his wide muscular chest, and the smoky-blue eyes, now dark with anger.

He growled, slamming the front door closed, hurling his keys across the room at me. "What the fuck were you doing at that club?"

I stood there and just stared at him. I had known the man over ten years, and still, he made my heart stop.

"Did you fuckin' hear me?"

Yes, I heard him, and yes, he was breathtaking. I smiled at him.

"Jory." His voice cracked on my name.

I ran toward him. He met me at the couch, grabbed me, and we fell down together in a tangle of arms and legs. As soon as I had some wiggle room, I got my hands free and on his shirt. It was coming off.

"Who was that woman the other night? Tell me!"

"For fuck's sake, Jory, she's undercover, she's a Fed, that's all that was," he said, his hands all over me. "You know me. There's nobody else but you."

I knew him.

"Put your leg over—"

"I missed you," I said, arching up, wanting to be closer.

"Look at me."

My eyes locked on his.

"Every part of Cristo Liron's life is bugged—his phone, his car.

Everyone heard you tell him you loved me the other night, confess it all, and while I love how honest you are, you basically took me off the frontline of my own case."

I stilled under him.

"You know we were this close to being derailed the other night with Zach Ducal almost making Cristo call off his deal with Adrian Miller, but you, just you, put everything back on track. Crosby Holt, he's the agent in charge of our task force, he must've said a million times that my boyfriend just kept us on track."

I reached up for Sam's face. "I thought you didn't want to come home."

He turned his head in my hands, kissed my left palm, and made a noise in the back of his throat.

"Sam?"

"I always want to come home, and you should know that instead of coming apart."

The undoing had been all me; he hadn't changed at all. I was the one, all by myself. "I was scared."

"Shame on you," he said as he lifted up off of me.

"Sam?"

"You should never doubt me. I don't deserve that," he said as he sat down beside me.

The absence had screwed with my mind. I had no one to blame but myself.

"Do I?"

Did he deserve me doubting him? "No," I answered truthfully.

"We're fine, J, everything's fine."

And it was. I just needed reassuring, and that probably made me weak, but that also made me kind of human.

"Could you please stop looking at me all heartbroken and come here already?"

Moving fast, I stood, pulled off my pajama bottoms, and kicked them away before scrambling, naked, into his lap. His hands were on my hips, yanking me forward. When I pressed my hardened shaft against his stomach, he groaned deep and sexy.

"Sam," I said, my voice cracking, "I missed you so bad."

His hands framed my face, and I could see in his eyes the love, the joy that touching my skin gave him, the wonder of looking at me.

"Talk to me."

"I... I'm so sorry. What I did in that club wasn't right. I just—"

"Oh, no," I soothed him, leaning forward, tasting him, deepening the kiss after the first one. "Sam." I rubbed my tongue over his, wriggled in his lap, and wrapped my arms around his neck. "I wanted that, I wanted you, I still do. Let's go to bed. I wanna be under you, have you deep inside, I need... I'm gonna come just thinking about it."

He rose easily to his feet, my weight of no concern at all, dropping his leather motorcycle jacket on the couch, kicking off his boots, letting them stay wherever they fell, walking me down the hall toward our bedroom.

He pinned me to the bed under him, and his weight on me made me shiver.

"Miss me?"

"You have no idea," I whispered, my hands digging into his back, feeling the hard muscles, loving the heat of him, the strength.

"You're so fuckin' beautiful."

I loved to hear the hitch in his breath when he was feeling his words as he spoke them.

"And I'm an idiot."

I kissed his eyes and didn't contradict him.

"No argument?" He chuckled deeply.

"Sam," I said, wiggling under him. "Take off your clothes."

"Wait," he ordered, looking down at my face. "I'm sorry, forgive me."

"For what?"

"This was stupid."

"What was?"

"Being away from you," he said as he kissed my forehead. "I thought I needed to do this to secure my spot with the marshals, and I didn't, and I just... I will never, ever, leave you again. It doesn't work for either one of us."

"But your career and—"

"I'm gonna leave the police force, J, and do what I've always wanted and become a US marshal. I got my paperwork, it cleared, and we can stay right here in Chicago, and even though it ain't an eight-hour-a-day job, it's not a three-month away job, either. I will protect

people, and I'm good at that. You know I'm good at that."

I nodded, so happy, so relieved. My life could stay as it was. "I got a new job too."

"Yeah?" He smiled at me and then groaned as I moved, pressing my hardened cock against his groin.

"Detective," I said softly, my voice low, deep, sensual, "please, take off your clothes."

He scrambled off the bed, which made me laugh, and I watched the man get naked as fast as he could. I enjoyed seeing all the sleek skin, the rippling muscles, the body I knew that housed the man I loved, all power and strength.

When he was naked, he dived back onto the bed, and I was laughing as he grabbed me and I was crushed in a vise covered in warm silky flesh.

"Grab the lube. I want you buried to your balls in my ass right fucking now. Hurry up."

So fast. He moved so fast and had the long, hard, thick length of him coated in slippery lubricant in seconds. I lifted my legs, and he rocked forward so my knees draped over his shoulders before, without any preparation, he slid inside my fluttering, needy hole.

I didn't clench up. Instead I relaxed my muscles, because it was the second time in one night and I hoped to God it wouldn't be the last.

His head fell back as he filled me, thrusting, driving, his rhythm like it had been earlier, hammering and hard. He was still frantic and needy, trembling with desire, and I loved how necessary I was. I grabbed my rigid shaft, which was already leaking, and tugged, feeling how close I was all over again. Sex with us wasn't normally so hungry. It was more about love than passion, but I remembered when it had only been frenzied and ravenous, and so responded. We would get back to the bonding that it had been before he left, but I would take the rutting, the primal animal claiming, as well. I would always accept whatever Sam Kage gave me.

"Mine," he growled, his voice deep and husky.

And even though I knew I was, it was still so good to hear.

HE WAS done.

The man I loved was passed out in our bed, and I was so happy I would have flipped cartwheels down the hall if I knew how to do one.

When my phone rang, I left the room to answer it because I didn't want him to wake up and leave me.

"Hello?"

"I'm downstairs and I wanna see you," Cristo Liron said.

Shit. "I'm going to bed."

"I want," he said, enunciating the words, "to see you."

But I couldn't. If he saw me at that moment, lips swollen and red, hair tousled, covered in hickeys, he'd know that I had not had simply a tryst in the back of a club. Sam left marks, always had, I hoped always would, and because they were fresh, they stood out sharply on my gold skin. I looked debauched, and if he came up....

"You already judged me once tonight. I think that's enough."

"Whatever you needed, I could have given you. We're friends, aren't we?"

"I'm not that kind of friend, never have been, never will be."

"I wanna come up."

"Not at one in the morning," I told him. "And not after how you were at the club."

"I was mad."

"Fine, be mad, but that doesn't make me want to let you up."

"I fuckin' hate this, Jory. Do you have any idea how frustrating you are?"

"Why, because I won't sleep with you? Give it a rest, already.

Go find some hot twink who wants to be your boy and set him up with a condo and an expense account."

"Jory—"

"Don't be a dick to me just because you need to get laid."

"I assure you, I can get laid anytime I want."

"Then do it and quit trying to make me feel shitty that it's not me," I snapped at him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Bye," I said and hung up.

"Are you kidding?"

I had enough time to turn before I was grabbed.

"Jory, what the fuck?" Sam barked, fingers digging into my arms with how tight he was holding me.

"Cristo Liron is a dick," I told him.

He just stared at me.

"What? He is."

"Jor—"

"What?"

"Jory, you gotta stay the fuck away from Cristo Liron!"

"Oh, I will, don't worry," I promised, but the way he was looking at me, something was up. "Spit it out, Kage."

"The only reason you're staying away from him is because you think he's an asshole!"

"He is an asshole."

"But that's not why you should stay away from him!"

"Don't get all worked up," I soothed him.

"Jory!"

"Volume, Kage, it's late."

He raked his hands through his thick, now-black hair, and pulled it back hard from his face.

"You realize that's gonna take, like, weeks to grow out."

"Baby—"

"And that color does not match your skin tone," I assured him.

"Jet black, Sam, really?"

"Jor—"

"Unless we buzz it all off," I said thoughtfully, remembering what Sam had looked like years ago when he had been a new recruit in the Marine Corps. I had seen pictures, and he had been so young and hot and cocky.

"Jory!"

"What?"

"Fuck," he snarled, grabbing me again, shaking me hard. "Cristo Liron is mad because he knows you fucked someone, but it wasn't him, right?"

"I didn't fuck anybody," I told him, smiling up into his eyes. "I had you in my bed, detective, and that's always way more than fucking."

He gave up and hugged me, arms around me, crushing me against his big hard body. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and as he bent to really hold me, I sighed deeply.

"You drive me nuts."

I did it to everyone. "I want your ring back on."

"I know, I figured that was coming."

"When you're a marshal—"

"It won't ever come off, I swear."

I exhaled sharply. "When will you come home for good?"

"Soon, baby, very soon."

But I was already missing him.

CHAPTER
TEN

Chapter Ten

MILES BROWN had a temp in his office, and when the temp and I both showed up in the copy room the following morning, he asked me which machine I was going to use, Arnold or Bob.

"I'm sorry?" I asked him.

"I don't care which one," he said, shrugging.

"No, I mean, Arnold? Bob?"

"Oh." He grinned at me. "Well, the one on the left, there, every time I send a file over the network instead of just running copies off the glass, it kills the file."

It terminated the file. I got it.

"And the other one is always jamming." Bob.

Oh, I liked him. I offered him my hand. "Jory Harcourt."

"As in Dane Harcourt?" He smiled as we shook.

"As in brothers, yeah."

"I'm Pedro, Pedro Blue."

"Blue?"

"My dad's from Texas, and my mom's from El Salvador."

He was definitely pretty, so I was all for the gene mixing that had produced him. "It's nice to meet you, Pedro."

"So what're you doing here, brother?" he asked with a big grin that showed off a killer smile and deep dimples as he released my hand. His coloring was gorgeous, dark mocha yummy.

"Covering until Dane finds a replacement."

"Oh, yeah, I heard Brooke and what's-his-name got the boot."

He shrugged. "But whaddya expect when you hire resume over experience?"

"Agreed." I nodded. "You wanna come to Dane's office after lunch today and interview for his assistant job?"

His eyes got huge.

"Well?" I prodded after a minute of him staring.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"You're not screwing with me?"

"No."

"Swear?"

"Not at all, promise."

"I would really love to do that, interview to work for that man."

That man.

"He's scary right, my brother?"

"Yes, he is."

"Is that okay?"

"It's very okay. Working for the über-boss, how cool would that be?"

"Very, I hope."

"Thank you," he said, and I saw the genuine appreciation there, "for inviting me to meet him."

"You're more than welcome."

And it was nice that I didn't have to look far. When Pedro was there after lunch, waiting nervously, resume in hand, I was pleased.

When he sat in the chair in front of Dane's desk, answered questions, and told my brother that if he didn't know how to do something he would ask instead of trying to bullshit him, I was even more pleased.

It was a good answer to the situation that Dane had posed.

When Dane asked him about loyalty, Pedro said that of course he would be loyal to Dane, and that no one's welfare would go before his—except his mother's. Mothers came before bosses.

"Of course," Dane agreed, smiling for the first time.

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"And I don't think you need a liaison," Pedro continued. "I think that's how the last guy got confused. He thought he needed to take clients out, schmooze them, wine them, dine them, and that's not the case. You have people waiting for months just to see you."

"Yes, I do," Dane all but yawned, and I got why. Dane knew he was in demand; he would have to be brain dead not to notice.

"Who would a liaison need to take out anywhere?"

I liked him more and more by the second, and I could tell Dane did too.

"So why would you need one?"

"I don't," Dane said.

"You don't," Pedro agreed. "You need a typist, maybe, but that's all."

And because he thought just like I had, Dane stood and offered him his hand and the job.

Pedro rose as well, accepted the now forty-five-thousand-dollar- a-year job and promised Dane that he would be the best assistant he ever had, as well as the last.

It was my hope as well as his.

There were steps he had to do, like inform the temp agency that he was done working for them and ready to start working for Dane.

He was looking forward to seeing me the following day and having me run him through all the specifics of the job. Dane was smiling when he left.

"He'll do well, Dane."

"Yeah, I feel the same way I did when I hired you."

"See, I told you, you should have put me in charge of hiring a long time ago."

"Yes, I should have."

Agreement was good to hear.

I HAD declined Dane's invitation to have dinner with him and Aja and some other friends because I wasn't up for the company.

"We're hangin' out too much." I chuckled, smiling at my brother.

"God, I couldn't agree more." He gave me a shadow of a smile before he patted my arm and turned for the parking garage.

So I had gone home, had dinner, watched some TV, missed

Sam, knowing that I would be alone in my bed that night, and was changed and ready to head back out for a run when I opened the door and Eddie Liron was there.

And he wasn't alone.

"Hi." I greeted him in my running shoes and track suit. "What's going on?"

He cleared his throat, and I could tell, right then, that he was nervous. "Jory," he said, taking a breath, "I need you to come with me."

"Why?"

"Cristo needs to talk to you about things."

"What things?"

"Just...." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Just come talk to him. It's a short ride, and then he'll ask you some questions, and then you're done."

"None of what you said or how you said it sounds appealing at all."

"Jory, you saved my life. I owe you. I would never let you get hurt."

"If I say no, are you gonna make me?"

"Yeah," he said, but he sounded pained.

"Okay," I agreed, "lemme grab my keys and my wallet and my phone."

He exhaled sharply, and I could tell that the fact that he didn't have to "make me" was very appealing.

I was quiet on the drive back downtown, and kept track of where we were going, the alleys we drove down, the buildings we passed, until we reached a pub. I was surprised, really. I was expecting a locked garage or a pier or something infinitely more sinister, more *Scarface* or *The Godfather*.

Inside the pub, it smelled damp and like wood polish. I followed behind Eddie as we passed people eating at tables, sitting at the bar, throwing darts, playing pool. It was crowded, and that made me feel a little better. I looked out of place in my running clothes, but no one stared too long. I started to calm... until I reached the table.

Sam was sitting at a round table with Agent Calhoun, two other men I didn't know, and Cristo Liron. And I could have blown it off, tried really hard to ignore the torn lip and the red blotches that would become bruises on Sam's face, but his eyes lifted, found mine, and heated. There was no missing, to anyone who was even remotely perceptive, that he was looking at what belonged to him. But thankfully, no one was giving Sam any attention—all eyes were on me.

"Go to him," Cristo taunted me, tipping his head at my boyfriend.

"To who?"

"To your man."

"What are you talking about?"

He snickered. "That's your detective, right?"

"Who?" I hoped I sounded annoyed. I was trying for it even as my heart pounded in my chest.

His brows furrowed with the first trace of uncertainty. "Him."

Cristo pointed at Sam.

"I guess I'm not understanding what's going on."

"Then I'll make it clear for you." His voice rose. "Is this or is this not your detective?"

"Not."

"No?"

"No." I squinted. "Have you not pulled up a picture of Sam Kage? I figured you would have, with all your interest in me."

"I never said that I was in—"

"Okay, wait." I raked my hands through my hair. "So you're sitting there telling me that you have no idea what Sam Kage looks like?"

Time ticked by, and there was a second flicker of doubt on his face.

"Seriously?"

"Jor—"

"I figured you, with all your connections and stuff, that you could for sure get into police department files. The bad guys can always do that kind of stuff in the movies."

"So I'm a bad guy now?"

I gestured at Sam. "Well, you're not the good guy."

He glared at me.

"What did you do to him?" I asked, going around the table until

I was beside Sam. It took every drop of concentration I had not to touch his face.

"I told him," Sam said, his eyes on mine, "that I didn't know you."

"But that's not true." I smiled at him. "Because we met on the yacht the other night." I looked back over at Cristo. "You were there, remember?"

And his eyes widened, like maybe, just maybe, he had forgotten that. When I returned my gaze to Sam's bruised face, he took a quick breath.

"I do remember that," Cristo said softly.

"Good," I said as my heart tried to claw its way out of my chest so it could leave me and go live in Sam's, where it belonged. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay." He winced when he sat back.

I squatted down beside the chair, getting a closer look at him, and saw that his shirt was torn and there were marks on his throat.

There looked to be a shoe imprint on the white T-shirt that was visible beneath the shredded dress shirt.

"Are your ribs broken?"

"Just bruised, I think," he told me, giving me a trace of a smile as he trembled just slightly. While it was hard for me not to touch Sam, it had to be just as difficult for him. He was hurt, and more than anything he wanted me to comfort him, kiss him, and put my hands all over him. "I'm so fuckin' sorry to drag you into this."

"You didn't drag me into anything," I said, scrutinizing him. He had been hit very hard, very long, and it was taking a lot of energy for me not to yell. The man needed to go to the hospital, and looking at him, allowed to do nothing else, was twisting my stomach into knots.

"Like I said, we met on the boat and that was it."

"Yes."

"You were with a very beautiful woman."

"Thank you, I'll tell her you said so if I get out of here in one piece."

"She's gonna be pissed that you were hurt."

"Oh, you have no idea."

I nodded and returned my eyes to Cristo Liron.

Every good thought I ever had about the man was gone, and because of that, so was his beauty. It was amazing how quickly it could happen. Sometimes people who were not so blessed in the looks department got stunning the longer you knew them because after awhile, you stopped seeing the outside and just saw their hearts. The opposite was also true. Some really hot guy, like Cristo Liron, suddenly lost all his poetry and light because it turned out, after all the sticking up for him I had done, that the man really was bad news. I hated it when Dane was right.

"Jory."

I just stared.

"Something bothered me all night," he said, leaning forward, his elbows on the table. "It seems that you and Detective Kage have been together for quite some time."

"Which I told you from the start," I reminded him.

"And I appreciated that," he told me. "But that was the problem.

I know people, and I never make mistakes. People around me sometimes do, but not me, never me."

"Could you get to the point?"

"Sure." He nodded, tipping his head at Adan, his bodyguard.

The huge man came around the table and stood behind Sam. He then grabbed Sam's hair and yanked his head back hard at the same time he put a gun to his temple.

"I own every face that you see in here, Jory, make no mistake about that. You yell fire in here, nobody's gonna move. This is my family. These are people I know. Hell, my brother's the one who brought you."

I absorbed that even as I fought not to take hold of Sam's forearm.

His eyes flicked to me. "It's okay, you're okay."

Sam had a gun pressed against the side of his head, but he was trying to comfort me.

"Hey!" Cristo Liron snapped his fingers at me like I was a dog.

"Over here."

I turned my head slowly.

"Better," he assured me. "I want your full attention."

And he had it.

"As I was thinking about you last night, I finally came to the conclusion that there was just no way. A guy like you, Jory... there's no way you fuck some stranger in the back of a club. And there's no way you don't give me hell on the phone last night when I called. You should have told me off for insulting your integrity, but you didn't."

You just hung up on me so you could be with whoever was there. But I know you, and you're a fighter if it matters, if you care enough, so I have to ask myself... who would you let fuck you up against a wall in a club and who was with you last night?"

I really had to give the man his due. In the short time that we had been acquaintances, he had actually paid attention and figured out the kind of guy I was. Too bad it wasn't going to do him any good.

"I didn't fuck anyone in the club," I told him honestly, because I had let *my* man put me up against a wall, but he was not just anyone.

"You told me you had sex."

"I lied."

"Lied then or now?"

"Then," I said flatly. "And if you've got someone who wants to put me on a polygraph machine, I will pass it."

He squinted at me. "You smelled like come at the club."

"Because I was stroking off, and I can masturbate whenever I fuckin' want, Mr. Liron," I told him, looking around the table, making sure I made everyone there excruciatingly uncomfortable. "I've been alone for a long time, and so when I finally go out to a club, hell yeah, I'm gonna jack off. I can stand in back of one of the rooms and watch two hot guys fuck and then I can jizz all over the wall if I want to... and God, I wanted to."

He squinted at me, Eddie squirmed in his seat, and the guy on the other side of Cristo looked away, embarrassed. The most important thing of all, though, was that Adan let go of Sam.

"Shall I call you when I splatter on my shower wall too?"

I had Agent Calhoun ready to crawl out of his skin; the others were looking anywhere but at me. Adan replaced his gun in his holster and looked across the pub, not making eye contact. It was like watching TV, but you couldn't get up and leave the room when faced with the embarrassing parts.

"You're lying," Cristo said flatly. "You fucked someone in the back of that club, and there was someone with you last night when I called, and since you don't fuck around—or say you don't—I think it was your detective."

I just stood there.

"And if your detective is at a club where I am, we have a problem."

I pointed at Sam. "Well, I can assure you that that ain't him. I have a picture on my phone if you'd like to see what the real Sam Kage actually looks like."

Calling him out was dangerous, but it was the only hand I had to play.

"Or, like I said, let's bust into the police department files and pull him up. It's a cool picture in his uniform, with the hat and all."

If he asked me for my phone, he'd look weak. If he checked the police database, he'd tip his hand about knowing someone who could do that for him. Either way, anyway, he had not thought this inquisition all the way through. He had acted on impulse, and now he was in over his head. And of course he could just shoot me and send Dane fish wrapped in butcher paper, but if he did that, there would be repercussions, and he knew that too. I wasn't anybody special, but I wasn't nameless or homeless either. And Sam was a whole other story. Killing police officers was bad juju. The man did not want that kind of heat.

So now he was stuck.

Cristo had been perceptive enough about me to know that I was made loyal, so my story, my original one about screwing a stranger at the club, he deduced, was a lie. And he was right. The problem was that when he cornered me, he hadn't been ready. So I had agreed that I had told him a lie and then given him a new one even more plausible than the first. And now he was screwed because it was his word against mine that I was lying, and as it stood, with my brutal masturbatory confession and his floundering, I

looked like the guy telling the truth. I sounded credible, and he just sounded jealous.

"Ask you a question?"

"Certainly," he said tightly, and I could tell, underneath the calm, that he was furious with how this was playing out.

"Why him?" I pointed at Sam. "Why not him?" I pointed at Agent Calhoun. "Or anyone else, for that matter?"

"Jason," he said, pointing at Sam, "was at the club last night."

"So were a lot of people. How many other guys did you beat up?"

"I—"

"And since we've concluded that this isn't Detective Kage, can I go now?" I asked as petulantly as I could. "Because my brother is expecting me at his office in the morning."

"Fuck you, Jory! You told me you fucked someone at that—"

"I wanted you to think I did because I just didn't want to fuck you!" I yelled back at him, my voice getting really loud so that family or not, friends or not, paid to be there or not, people were looking.

"You wanna fuck me so bad that you're tellin' me my ass looks good, well, fuck you! I don't bend and spread for any man but mine, and now because you're a paranoid piece of shit, you're beating up random people! Do the people you do business with know you're a complete fuckin' psychopath?"

He rose so fast his chair fell over, slamming to the floor. "You fucked him," he said, pointing at Sam. "I know you did, or why would you have lied?"

"I didn't fuck anybody, but I lied because even though you're having a really hard time wrapping your brain around it, I don't wanna sleep with you!"

It was loud, really, really loud, and shrieky, and as over the top as I could make it, and *oh God*, I wanted to crawl under the covers on my bed, and I wasn't even the one on the receiving end of the volume.

I was going to make this bad for him because it was the only way to save Sam. Nothing else mattered.

Cristo's ego had gotten the better of him, and he was standing there, yelling at me, letting all his associates know it, letting the whole pub know it. Like Sam and Dane always said, I could try the patience of a saint, and as Cristo Liron was not a saint, I drove him right over the edge. I never mean to, normally, but I had purposely baited the man, and he had been hooked. And he didn't know me well enough yet to know that in a pinch, normally, my brain actually kicked in. It was why I had never, ever, blown Sam's cover. Even seeing the man hurt, I had not blown it.

"Jor—"

"Are you done questioning me about masturbating in clubs now? Or would you like to humiliate me some more, Mr. Liron?" I asked him, making my voice as surly and petulant as I could manage.

"You're his friend, right?" I asked Calhoun.

"Yes."

"You should take his ass to the hospital." I turned to look at Cristo and said, "Unless, of course, you're planning to take us both out back and put bullets in our heads."

His eyes were flat, cold, and hard.

"You could send wrapped fish to my brother."

"Fuck you!"

"No, fuck you!"

It was a juvenile exchange that dissipated the last bit of fear from the table.

"I'll drive you to the hospital," Eddie offered Sam, getting up and coming around the table, reaching for him.

Sam's eyes met mine. "We'll wait until Mr. Harcourt leaves too."

"Let's all get the hell out," I announced, striding toward the front door.

"Jory!"

But I didn't stop. I would never stop again for Cristo Liron.

Outside on the curb, I shivered in the cold night air.

"Jory."

I turned and looked at Eddie as he was walking Sam, with Agent Calhoun on the other side, toward the car I had ridden over in.

"I can take you home, Jory."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm not going home. I'm gonna go visit my friend Joe."

He looked confused. "Okay."

"You take care, and thanks," I said, turning away, not trusting myself to look at Sam.

"Jory!"

I looked back at Eddie.

"I'm so sorry for everything."

I nodded. "I know."

"You gotta not be around for awhile, Jory. Get out of town until he cools down."

"He had a meltdown in there," I told him. "What's the cooling off period on that?"

He just looked at me, and I turned away.

"Grab him!"

"Aww, fuck, Jory, run!"

The command to run had been, surprisingly, Adan's, so I bolted.

"Stop, you fuck, we know where you fuckin' live!"

Not comforting, but what was, was that Sam was safe. I needed to be too.

I dragged quick air into my lungs and ran. Looking over your shoulder was overrated. I was pretty sure that if people in movies did less of it, more of them would live.

"No!" Eddie's yell was almost a cry, his voice cracking and breaking.

There was a squeal of tires, and I heard the roar of an engine beside me at the same time I heard shoes on the pavement behind me.

Maybe once my partner wasn't a police detective anymore, maybe—just maybe—I could stop running for my life. Although in his defense, the first time around the park had been all me.

If it had been a straight length of road, I would have worried, but this was downtown before ten at night, and there were still cars, restaurants and bars open, there were patches of traffic, and the street was crowded. Me, by myself, weaving in and around people was easy, but not for the guys behind me. They had to shove by strangers, and so it was slow going. The car that was chasing me got wedged in traffic, and that was it. I took a left into a

hotel lobby because I was getting close to the train platform and I needed to ditch them before I got there.

They got close because I paused to figure out which way I wanted to go, but as they started pushing their way through the crowd, I went over and up on tables. The hotel security was helpful as they started to yell, and someone said to call the police. I was vaguely aware of my name being shouted, but I ran on, down a hall, the lights changing around me from low and elegant to bright and harsh as I went through the kitchen. I swerved, leaped as pots and pans fell, but

I was matched stride for stride, the space between us shrinking with every added movement I was forced to make.

I wanted to see who was chasing me, but it would take precious seconds, so I fought the urge and ran on. Bouncing off walls, someone had a hold of me for a moment before I careened around another corner and wound up back in the lobby. There were stairs to the street, and I bolted into traffic. I heard the crunch of metal, the squeal of tires, but I ran on, and so did my pursuers. It was dark in the alley I ran down, but I knew they were still there because I could hear the panting and finally a roar of frustration.

I flew out the other end and went across another street. A car almost hit me, and I had to stop, swerving around it, losing precious seconds. The drizzling that had wet my hair and track suit suddenly turned to heavy rain, and I was running through a downpour. I pushed harder and almost went down before I felt my stride even out and the speed kick in.

Chairs and tables set up for an outdoor bistro, freshly abandoned, proved too difficult for me to push my way through. I fell and someone was on me. We crashed together into wood and steel, and there was a hand on my throat and another on my jacket. I pulled and twisted, but he was bigger, stronger. I felt a lift and then I was falling hard, fast. I smashed onto a table, but it didn't break, it held, and I rolled off and hit the solid, gritty concrete. It was dark for a second, and then I felt water splashing my face. I got my hands under me, pushed up, but the ground tilted, and I couldn't steady myself. I

saw him in pieces, backing away, staggering, seemingly hurt, and swaying as he regarded me.

There were only the two of us, everyone else had given up, and I was glad. My legs supported me, and I was up, but my head hurt, like someone had put an ice pick through my right eye, the pain instant and excruciating. But it receded fast enough for me to regain my balance and bolt. I had to get safely to the train platform. I had to see Sam. I had to make sure he was okay.

"Jory!"

Not a roar, a call.

"Jory!"

I pulled up and saw the awning across the street, and under it, Fallon and Shane. I charged back across, nearly got hit by two cars, but reached them and dove hard. At Shane.

"What the hell?" he yelled even as he clasped me tight.

I slid down his body and crumpled to the cold damp ground.

"Jory, what's going on?"

I pointed across the street, and they saw the four men there now, standing, waiting. "They think I know something about a case Sam is working on."

"Your boyfriend the cop?" Shane asked me, still clutching me tight.

I nodded.

"Call the police," he ordered Fallon.

"Already dialing," he said, phone at his ear.

"He's calling the police!" Shane yelled across the street, kneeling down beside me, and putting his hand on my chest. "It's okay, Jory, we're here, you're safe."

And when I rolled my head to look up at him, I smiled. "Thanks, Shane."

Fallon put his hand on his boyfriend's shoulder, and when I looked up at him, his smile was enormous. Apparently, by choosing Shane to barrel into, I was collecting all kinds of brownie points. It was like I told people, a lot of times my brain actually did work, and I made conscious choices. It was just that no one ever believed me.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Chapter Eleven

"YOU'RE lucky I speak Jory!" Sam fumed at me. "Fuck!"

When I said earlier, in front of Eddie Liron, that I was going to go see my friend Joe, that had been code for Sam to meet me at St. Joseph's Hospital. And he had understood it, so I had no idea why he was mad. It turned out that even though Eddie had volunteered to take Sam, Agent Calhoun had insisted on bringing him alone.

"But how did you guys ditch Eddie?"

"Everyone was chasing you," Agent Calhoun told me. "By that time no one was paying any attention to us."

"So I was a diversion." I smiled happily. "Good."

"Not good!" Sam yelled. "Come here so I can look at you!"

When I was close to the bed, he grabbed me and put his hands on my face.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing?"

"Stop yelling," I soothed him, looking down at him, at the bruises on his face, at the eye that would be black and blue. "I'm fine."

Tell me what the doctor said."

"Did anybody hurt you?"

"Sam." I hardened my voice. "Talk to me."

From the way he was looking at me, tilting my chin up, smoothing a hand down my throat, I knew that he wasn't going to spill.

But it turned out that I didn't have to wait for Sam to give me splotchy details, and that was good since he was terrible with them on a good day. The doctor showed up, and once I explained who I was—civil union, my ring, and that I was the emergency contact on file with the Chicago Police Department—I got the rundown on Sam's condition.

It wasn't as bad as I had thought. The ribs were not cracked, his kidneys, even though they had taken a few punches, were not bruised, so he would not be peeing blood. That had happened in the past, and it scared the hell out of me. His concussion was mild, but he would still be staying overnight in the hospital since there was no one at home to look after him.

"Why aren't you coming home?" I asked, hearing my voice rise, hating it but unable to stop it.

"I'm still undercover," he told me.

"How?"

"My cover's not blown. You were amazing."

And only then did I realize that maybe I should have just come clean.

"You did the right thing."

But it didn't feel right. I wanted to be at home, watching him sleep, checking to make sure he was fine, and just for a second, the feeling washed through me of how much I wanted my life back, and I felt faint.

"Gimme your hand," he told me.

My fingers laced in Sam's, held against his heart, comforted me.

"Soon. It will all be back to normal very soon."

But soon was taking forever.

"I'm gonna be fine," he told me.

He needed to rest, have lots of fluids, and basically stay away from people who wanted to use him for a punching bag.

"He'll be fine," Dr. Allen Maruya promised me.

"Thank you." I smiled at him.

"Jory!"

I turned, and there was Agent Calhoun and another man I didn't know, but they were both wearing their badges on chains.

"Is this him?"

"Yes, sir."

The man I didn't know thrust his hand out to me. "Jory Harcourt, Crosby Holt, FBI, pleasure to meet you."

"And you, sir." I smiled, taking the offered hand as another man joined us.

"Mr. Har—"

"It's just Jory."

"Jory." He smiled at me, turning to present the man to me. "This is Lieutenant Ramon Diaz from the Federal Police in Mexico. We're working this case with them."

I lifted my head and was greeted with very warm, dark brown eyes. "Hello, sir," I said, offering him my hand.

He took it in both of his, holding tight. "You have been a blessing, Mr. Harcourt, keeping this operation afloat, but now it is time for us to close this case on Señor Liron."

I nodded. "So you're a federale, sir?"

"It's not a term we use, Jory. It's American slang from the movies."

"Oh."

He smiled and the laugh lines in the corner of his eyes crinkled.

"You look disappointed."

"I am, just a little."

"Hollywood creates many myths," he told me, patting my shoulder. "And now we need to speak to Detective Kage. I must tell you, Mr. Harcourt, that we could not account for his whereabouts last evening, and so when Cristo Liron took him today, and we found out why he was being beaten, we were all very concerned with the choices he might have made in putting this investigation, as well as his own life, in jeopardy."

My eyes flicked to Sam's.

"To simply go and seek you out when he knew that Cristo Liron was watching you would have been a very foolish decision for a mere rendezvous."

There had been nothing "mere" about it. Sam knew I was losing my mind. Space and time away were no good for me. I didn't do it well. I gave all the people waiting for the return of soldiers so much credit. I would have fallen apart. And it wasn't even the time itself that was murder, it was the

uncertainty. If I knew where Sam was, what he was doing, I was fine. But the whole *he could be in mortal danger*—that was the part that got me.

"But as you selflessly gave so honest an account of your activities the previous night, no one can doubt the validity, even Cristo Liron."

I looked back at the lieutenant.

"Because of you, the cover of Detective Kage and Agent Calhoun, as well as many others, remains intact, and again, we thank you."

I took a breath. "So you guys let Sam get beat up, huh?"

"We could do nothing else, or the cover would be blown. To save him from it would have been tipping our hand."

I nodded and walked to the window. Yelling would serve no one, but I was mad.

"It would be best, Mr. Har—Jory, if you went out of town for a few days. This would give Cristo Liron time to calm and get back to business and—"

"Agent Holt."

We all turned to the man who had just come through the door.

"Cristo Liron is in Emergency looking for Detective Kage—or for Jason Bradley—so everyone needs to clear out of here."

I stayed where I was.

"Jory?" Agent Calhoun sounded worried.

"You're gonna take care of Sam, right? I mean, like, *really* 'cause he's hurt."

"Yes," the agent in charge, Crosby Holt, promised instead. "I'm quite pleased with how he's handled himself, and he's going to be a deputy US

marshal, Jory, so yes, we'll take very good care of him.

You have my word."

I crossed the floor fast, bent, kissed Sam, and rubbed my nose along his.
"Please be careful, please."

"I love you," he said softly under his breath, clutching at my shirt. "I'm sorry for everything, but I'm not sorry for yesterday. It was stupid, but I'm not sorry."

"Good." My breath caught as I kissed him.

"Don't come back."

I nodded, and without looking, ran out of the room. I did what I always did and took the stairs up two flights and then took the elevator all the way down. I went out the front and was on the street and in a cab minutes later.

I HAUNTED my own house, and finally, after two in the morning, my phone rang.

"Hi," I sighed deeply. "How do you feel?"

"I feel like I got run over by a truck, but I'm okay. I've taken worse beatings."

"I'd rather you took none from now on."

"Well, that's never gonna happen since I'm an officer of the law and all, but I promise to work on it."

"Try hard."

"Yes, baby."

I took a breath.

"I'm okay, J, really."

It was so good just to listen to his voice.

"And I have no regrets, like I said. I was stupid. It was stupid but inevitable."

He was talking in generalities just in case someone was listening, I was sure. Not, as I was always reminded, that he was good with details. He was completely horrible with them. I would ask,

"How was the wedding?" and be told that they, whoever, had gotten married. Big deal. I would ask, "How was your day?" and get a shrug of broad shoulders before I was pinned down onto the couch or pulled into his lap.

"I want you to go out of town for a bit. Can you do that?"

"To where?"

"I called Dane, and he said he has a timeshare in Waikiki."

"You want me to go to Hawaii without you?"

"Not really, but it's as far away as you can go and still be in the United States."

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"No," I told him. "I'd rather wait here for you."

"J, I'm done in the field. I'm stuck at the hospital, and then I'll be riding a desk for the rest of this investigation."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"You should. It's the truth. When have I ever lied to you?"

He hadn't. The man didn't lie.

"What did Cristo want when he came to your room?"

"He apologized for letting things get so out of control and told me that we could still do business if I wanted."

"What did Agent Calhoun say?"

"He put on a good show, told Cristo he was a psychopath and insulted him a little."

"And then Cristo apologized some more."

"Yep, he had to make it better, or he would have lost face with everybody."

"So after the groveling, you guys let everything be bygones and shook hands."

"It was nowhere near groveling, but yeah, we patched things up."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"Nothing flattering."

"Lemme guess, I'm a whore and trash and all that good stuff."

"Uh-huh," he said tightly.

I cleared my throat because I knew that was hard for him. Sam did not let anyone run me down, and so having to sit through Cristo Liron ranting about me had to have been difficult. "It's okay that you didn't defend my honor. I get it, you know."

"I fuckin' hate this, and I'm thinking that me being away from all of it is fine. I don't think I can look at Liron anymore without taking his fuckin' head off."

"And how do you get away with not seeing him?"

"Agent Calhoun told him that he's sending me back to Colombia."

"Colombia," I said, chuckling. "Cool."

"Shut up."

I laughed at him.

"Jory."

Uh-oh, serious voice. "Yeah?"

"Please go to Hawaii. This whole mess will wrap up in another week, week and a half, and then I'll take the first flight out and join you."

"Oh yeah?"

"I swear."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"And you'll stay at least a week."

"Two days."

"Four."

"Three."

"Three," I sighed heavily. "Deal. Three days alone with you on a tropical island—I'll take it, Kage."

He chuckled, and I heard the deep rumble that I loved.

"Was Dane pissed?"

"Not at me," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

"You're the one who's running around saving the brothers of drug smugglers and not listening to him."

"He told you that, huh?"

"Yessir, he did."

"Shit, you realize, of course, that he's gonna be here at like the buttcrack of dawn to throw me on an airplane."

"Yep," he said, cackling.

"Christ."

"Hey," he breathed out. "Pack some clothes for me, okay?"

Suddenly there was no air in the room.

"Okay?"

"Okay," I managed to get out.

"I love you, baby, breathe."

And I did.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

Chapter Twelve

WHEN I got off the plane at the Honolulu International Airport, there was the boarding area and then immediately, to get to the main terminal, I had to walk outside. It hit me instantly—sweet, flower-scented air, sticky humidity on my skin, and a vision of the whole world bathed in bright, beautiful sunshine. It was like a painting, the turquoise-blue sky, the blinding white of the clouds, and the lush green of the palm trees. And that was just the airport!

Inside, it was the same cluttered mess that every airport was, with the added touch of the lei sellers, and men in aloha shirts, and some women in muumuus. After I claimed my luggage, I made my way to the curb to wait in line for a cab. The trip to Waikiki from the airport was fast at two in the afternoon, and thankfully, since I had gotten on the plane at five thirty in the morning in Chicago, the driver didn't want to chat.

The timeshare was in use, so Dane had basically just made reservations for me at a hotel in Waikiki. And because he was my brother and he never did anything small, the suite was much too big for one person. I could see beachfront from my lanai, and Kalakaua Avenue, named after the king who brought back the hula, and if I looked out to sea, I had a killer view of the sunset, which was truly breathtaking. Just the wash of colors that the sky became took my breath away. Standing there on the balcony, twenty-three floors up, locked in my lavish, enormous suite, I felt almost as safe as I did when I was in Sam Kage's arms.

When it was dark, like a vampire, I went out.

March in Hawaii was not the cold wet that Chicago was, so when I went out in jeans, a short-sleeve button-up, and sneakers, I wasn't worried that I needed a jacket. The sidewalks were crowded with people, and between the scent of the ocean and what I had thought was magnolia but had been corrected by the concierge—it was white ginger or pikake, that was carried on the breeze—I could not stop taking deep breaths of the air. When I walked by an outdoor restaurant, the smell of garlic and onions made my stomach roll with hunger. Inside, I was told that the wait for a table might be easily an hour, so I was ready to try someplace else, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned, and when I did, I smiled.

I was looking at my ex, Aaron Sutter.

"Hey," I chuckled. "How are you?"

He just stared at me with his always-gorgeous bright-blue eyes.

The man was classically handsome, with chiseled features, broad shoulders and a lean, muscular physique. At that moment, in slacks and a muted aloha shirt, he looked amazing.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"Me? I spend two weeks in March every year in Hawaii with some of my fraternity brothers from Yale. We come to fish and sail and just detox and catch up. You're the one who's a surprise."

"I don't remember you making this trip when we were together."

He shrugged. "I cancelled that year because I knew you wouldn't come with me."

"I would have come if I could have afforded it."

"Yeah, I know, but living on your budget was no fun for me."

Which I was sure was reason number twenty-seven or forty-two on the list of the reasons we had broken up. We were so not compatible on so many levels.

"Why are you here?" he pressed me.

"Just on vacation."

"Alone?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Why not?"

He squinted at me. "That's not like you. You don't even like to eat by yourself."

Which was true, but it had been years since he'd known truths about my life or me. "Yeah, well, Dane offered, so I came."

"I see."

"Are you leaving?"

"No, we actually just got here and...." He reached out and fixed the collar of my shirt. "Why don't you come eat with me? I'd love you to meet my partner."

I got excited. "You have a partner?"

"Yes," he groused at me. "And don't look so surprised."

A surge of feeling washed over me, because holy crap, I had always wanted Aaron Sutter to find his Prince Charming. Long ago and way too late, he had come to the epiphany that he loved me, but I had known, as I always did, that only one man would do for the rest of my life.

"I'm not surprised." I shook my head. "I'm just happy."

He fiddled with my sleeve. "I actually have some good qualities, you know."

And he did, God, he did. "Yeah, but you can also be a real dick."

He gave me the shrug combined with the tip of his head like yeah, yeah , so what. I couldn't help it, I lunged.

As he held me, as I squeezed the life out of him, he chuckled.

I followed him to the best table in the place, because really, however rich Hayes Fisher was, or even Cristo Liron with all his drug money, it did not compare to the wealth that Aaron Sutter had inherited and then made bigger with his brilliant brain. He had a habit of wise investing and knowing when to get off the rollercoaster before it started the downward run. He had never been accused of anything even remotely unethical, but was still despised in many financial circles. Wherever he was, he was the alpha, the leader of the pack, and he was used to people deferring to him all the time because of what he represented—power and the almighty dollar.

As we reached the table, all eyes were on us, and he moved quickly to stand behind a man who looked familiar.

"Jory, I'd like you to meet Jaden Cobb. Jaden, this is Jory Harcourt."

His eyes, which were really sort of strange, too dark for his face, got huge as he looked at me. The lashes were long, and I realized after a minute that he was wearing mascara. I had no problem with men wearing makeup, many of my friends did, my buddy Evan never left the house without concealer and eyeliner—just enough to make his eyes pop, not enough to really notice—but it just seemed contrived on Jaden. He was perfect, really perfect, and it was purposely done. His blond hair had gold highlights in it, and it was shorter than my own now that it fell to my shoulders. He was tan, I guessed from baking under the warm Hawaiian sun, and his lips were plump and full, maybe from collagen. All of it together gave the impression of trophy, but it was possible I was reading too much into things. I did that on occasion.

"Hi." I smiled at him, following Aaron, joining him beside Jaden as he got up.

"Jory," he said quickly, and then he hugged me.

It was not a warm hug. It was tense, but he was trying, for Aaron, and that was nice. I hugged him back, held him when he tried to pull free, and gave him an extra squeeze. I felt some of the tension leave him.

I was introduced to the four other men at the table, three with wives, and another with a partner like Aaron. They were all very nice, and I was pleased that Aaron's friends now did not include those that had never liked me. I had always been considered the guy Aaron Sutter was slumming with. It was nice to have none of that baggage when you were just meeting people.

The food on the table was served family style, so I didn't have to worry about showing up late. They had just gotten there maybe a half hour before, so all I had to do to catch up was get a drink and then dig into the appetizers. There was poki, which was fresh cubed Ahi with onions, and limu, which was seaweed, and sea salt. It was good when dipped in wasabi mixed with soy sauce, but Aaron ate it without anything else. The edamame, soybeans, were mixed with garlic, ginger, pepper, and chili flakes. It was so good. Sucking the beans out of the pods was half the fun, and the beer to wash it all down was refreshing.

I listened to stories, and Jaden kept everyone entertained with a running monologue about his and Aaron's last trip to Hong Kong.

They had found the best places to eat and treasures in unexpected little holes in the wall. I enjoyed listening, imagining what traveling the world was like as he spoke.

"Have you traveled, Jory?" Jaden asked, putting me on the spot.

"Oh, no," I said, smiling at him. "I wish."

He looked confused. "I'm sorry, I thought... I understood that you and Aaron used to be together for a time."

I nodded. "Yeah, like a year and a half or so."

"And you didn't travel with him?"

"Nope," I said, taking a sip of my beer. "I couldn't afford it. He did all his globetrotting without me."

"Which I'm sure made him very happy to go home," his friend Ted threw in.

"I dunno." I shrugged. "Maybe."

"Absolutely," Aaron said, hand in my hair, curling a long piece of it around my ear.

"Awww." One of the wives smiled at me—Miranda, I thought her name was. "It's nice to still be friends with your exes."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, leaning in, bumping Aaron with my shoulder.

His hand moved to my shoulder and stayed there.

The Kalua pig—roasted pork that was cooked in an emu, an underground oven—was salty and moist, and I could not stop eating it. There was lomi salmon, which was diced in onions and tomatoes and chili water, and poi, which I tried but didn't like, though it was a really cool sort of purple color, and sweet potatoes, which I loved. I also liked the garlic steak and the seared mahi-mahi.

"When did you eat last?" Aaron teased me, bumping my knee with his, chuckling as he ordered me another beer.

"On the plane," I said, laughing at him.

He shook his head. "You should be in bed."

I shrugged. "I gotta eat."

The company was nice, the banter between friends, tales that were new to me, and it was all warm and jovial, nothing cutting or mean or told for any reason but laughter. When it came time to settle up, Aaron took care of the bill, and we all thanked him. On the street, walking with everyone, he suggested drinks and everyone agreed.

"I need to sleep," I told him, stopping, realizing I was barely on my feet.

"So tomorrow," he told me, hand on the side of my neck.

"We're driving out to Haleiwa to meet up with the other five guys from our frat, and their wives and partners, and stay at this bed and breakfast out there."

"Oh." I nodded. "Okay."

"No, jackass," he said as he grinned at me, pulling me close to him. "Come with us. I'll get you a room."

I shook my head. "Aaron, I can't—"

"You're not intruding, J. It's very casual and small. The town is quaint, and there's a lot to do, and you can just hang out."

"I shouldn't—"

"You should," he insisted.

And all his friends agreed that I should, and Jaden, especially, was adamant.

"Check out of your hotel tomorrow and come with me."

Not being all alone in Hawaii was much too tempting to say no to.

I HAD called and left a message for Sam, so he'd know where I was, and I called Dane and told him where I was going and that I was with Aaron

Sutter. I was frankly surprised when he had no problem with it.

"I thought you worried about me being around other men while Sam was gone," I ribbed him.

"But Aaron Sutter is not a stranger," Dane assured me. "I know all about him."

The logic seemed lost on me, but that was okay.

Aaron was there in the morning to collect me and take me to breakfast, just him and me and Jaden. After that, we had to make a run over to the Ala Moana mall, the largest one in the islands, all four levels of outdoor breezy fun. And it was interesting to walk around and stroll into places like Chanel and Armani in shorts and flip-flops and still have people wait on us. I was with Aaron, and they saw his Patek watch, saw Jaden's Cartier diamond ring, and fawned all over them. I was the entourage, so I wasn't shunned and was allowed to follow.

I loved being at a mall, any mall, because people watching was one of my favorite things to do in the world. Just looking at Aaron and Jaden under a microscope was engrossing. The rest of the crowd was just gravy.

Jaden was gracious at accepting all the gifts that I had never allowed the man to get for me. Silver cufflinks at Tiffany & Co. were received with a kiss, clothes at Lacoste were rewarded with a squeeze of the hand, and at the cologne counter at Prada, the lovely salesgirl asked if I was in the market for a new scent as well.

"Oh, no," I said, smiling at her. "Thank you, though."

When we left, Jaden took hold of my arm.

"I'm so sorry, Jory," he said, startled for a second as I slid my arm through his so we were walking arm in arm. "You must be bored out of your mind."

"No," I assured him. "I like hanging with you guys."

Jaden didn't seem inclined to believe me, but when Aaron explained my penchant for the human condition, he let it go.

On the way out to the North Shore, we stopped along the side of the road and had lunch at a shrimp truck in Kahuku. It was so good, and Aaron enjoyed watching me eat.

"It's good," he said with a chuckle, seeing the way Jaden picked at his.

"Oh my God, it's heaven," I assured him as I licked my fingers.

Jaden did not look convinced.

"Why couldn't we stay at Turtle Bay instead of in Haleiwa?"

Jaden asked Aaron.

"Because...." He smiled wide, shaking his head as he watched me eat. "I wanted it to just be me and my friends for the week, and no one else. We can drive out there and have dinner if you want one night."

He was silent.

"You want to?"

He shook his head no.

"Oh, you know what would be cool?" I said excitedly.

Aaron leaned his cheek on his fist and looked at me. "What's that?"

"Can we see the lava?"

"Wrong island."

"Oh. How 'bout the black-sand beaches?"

"Nope."

"Crap."

"You want me to fly you over to the Big Island?"

"Is that where it all is?"

He nodded.

I thought about it. "No, I guess not."

"I will if you want."

But there was too much to do on the island I was already on. I pointed at his plate. "Are you gonna eat that?"

"You have a brain like a gnat."

"Why, because I'm still hungry?"

He passed me the rest of his shrimp.

The drive was gorgeous, the mountains and all the green, and the air smelled incredible, so clean but always scented with some kind of flowers. In the back of the open Mustang convertible, I closed my eyes and let the wind hit my face and the sun bake me.

I must have dozed because Aaron had to shake me awake when we got to the bed and breakfast. There was a main house, like a plantation-style home, and then a series of seaside cabins, cabanas, bungalows—whatever you wanted to call them. Aaron explained that I was an addition, and the owner was happy to welcome me.

My cottage opened on the beach, and I could walk from my tiny living room to the porch to the sand to the tide pools. There was a wooden swing that I could sit in and put my feet up on the railing.

The breeze came off the ocean, and as I lay sprawled out, I could not remember ever being in a more picturesque and soul-soothing location. The

only way it could have been better was if Sam was sitting beside me.

"Jory."

I looked up from my contemplation of the ocean to find Jaden on my porch.
"Hey."

He cleared his throat. "Can I sit with you?"

"Course."

When he sat down beside me, I was greeted with pale green eyes.

"Oh," I said, grinning at him. "You wear contacts."

"Yes."

"You shouldn't," I told him. "The green is beautiful."

His brows furrowed.

"Sorry, they suck. Better?"

He got up and paced a few feet away. "Are you really this fuckin' clueless, or are you just a sadistic-ass bastard?"

I crossed my arms and looked over at him. "I guess the clueless one, because I am completely lost right now."

He nodded before raking his fingers through his hair. "Okay, so do you spend two hours a day every day at a tanning salon?"

"No."

"Do you own a tanning bed?"

I snorted out a laugh. "No."

He sucked in a breath. "Do you dye your hair blond, or is it natural?"

"It's called dirty blonde," I said, chuckling. "And I was born with it."

His lips pressed together tight. "And have you had any work done to your face?"

I squinted at him. "What is this about?"

He took a step back and gestured at himself. "I work at this.

You're naturally beautiful, but I have—"

"Please," I scoffed. "You're—"

"I'm twenty-three. How old are you?"

"What?"

"You heard me. How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty-one next January," I said with a yawn.

"Really? You're already thirty?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You don't look it."

I was so lost. "Could you just—"

"Jory, are you fuckin' kidding? Look at me."

"I am looking at you."

"But you're not seeing me."

"I am," I said, sitting up, really paying attention. "And can I tell you that I have the weirdest feeling that we've met somewhere before."

"We haven't, but I remind you of someone, right?"

"Yeah. Who?"

"You, asshole!"

He had so left me way behind in the dust. "I'm sorry?"

"Jory, for fuck's sake," he yelled at me. "Aaron Sutter has made me into you. I had no idea—but then last night when I met you, it all fell into place."

"What're you—"

"He got me all these different colored contacts, you know?" He ignored me. "But I started to notice that if I wanted something, if I was wearing the brown ones I got whatever I asked for. If I wanted to seduce him, I had to have the brown ones in, and I gotta be honest, other guys have always told me how gorgeous my eyes are, but Aaron... it's the brown ones that do it for him, big time."

My stomach started to tighten.

"And I've had work done on my chin, my nose, to make them more delicate, and now I know why."

"Jaden—"

He cut me off sharply. "No. Aaron bought me a tanning bed for my birthday last year."

I got up and walked into the room to grab my duffle.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving," I told him, realizing how much I wanted to just pass out on the bed with the breeze blowing through the room.

"Are you kidding?" he almost shrieked at me, moving fast to bar my path.
"If you leave, I'm dead."

I turned to face him, and I realized that we were almost eye to eye. I had maybe a half an inch on him. "After all that, you can't expect me to stay."

"Jory, don't you realize that this is it for me? I have to show

Aaron Sutter that the guy he has now is the one for him, and the guy he used to have—you—is not."

"Okay."

"So if you could help out by being a total dick, I would appreciate it."

I looked at him.

"What?"

"You want me to be an asshole to Aaron."

"Yes, please."

I shook my head. "You get that Aaron Sutter and I have been broken up for, like, forever, right?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been with him?"

"Two years."

"Which is six months longer than he and I went."

"What's your point?"

"My point is that you like being his boy, right?"

His scowl was dark. "What the hell do you—"

"Oh, get off it. I was there today. He buys you clothes, jewelry, things—you live with him, he takes you everywhere with him—you're kept. You don't rock the boat. You do whatever he wants whenever he wants to do it, right?"

"I—"

"That wasn't me. His relationship with me was hard work. I ran him through it all the time. We didn't go places together unless I could afford my own ticket, unless I could afford to pay my own way.

"This"—I gestured around the room—"God knows what this cost a night, but I'm gonna go to the office here in a bit and have all of it put on my credit card, and then I'm gonna spend the next year, year and a half, paying it off because Aaron Sutter doesn't pay for me to do anything. Get it?"

"Aaron said you were letting some guy named Dane Harcourt pick up the tab for your hotel in Waikiki."

I squinted at him.

"What?"

"Do you remember my last name?"

I could tell when he got it.

"Oh, Jory Harcourt... Dane Harcourt... he's your brother."

"Yep."

"So you're saying beyond your family, no one takes care of you."

"That's right."

He was angry suddenly. "You think I'm a whore."

"I don't, not really, but don't stand there and tell me that you guys are equals, either. He pays, you ride, and he's happy. He looks happy, so whatever your deal with him is, it's not for me to judge. If you're cool with things, too, let it go, but don't blame shit on me or him. If you want your life to stay how it is, you look and act how he wants."

There was only silence.

"It's weird that we look alike, yeah. And if it bothers you, say something. But don't blame me for whatever rings you're jumping through, because I walked away from this, from him, and I would like to be his friend if he'll let me, but nothing more."

He stared at me, and I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I touched the screen, unlocking it, and passed it to him.

"Oh," he said, looking at a picture of me and Sam. I was kissing his cheek, wrapped around him tight, eyes closed, pressed against the man from head to toe, and he was holding me just as close but with his head turned, smiling at the camera. "This is your detective?"

"How did you know that—"

"Aaron said that you lived with a police detective."

"I more than live with him, Jaden," I said, lifting my left hand so he could see the ring. "Seriously, I'm the last person you should ever be worried about. I have loved Sam Kage for so long it's hard for me to remember a time I didn't."

He was studying my face. "Then why are you here alone?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Yeah."

"Sit down."

And he did.

As I talked and talked, his eyes got bigger and bigger. I explained about how it had all started with Eddie Liron and led to Cristo being really pissed off. I told him what Dane had said and how I had been fired and all about Fallon liking me and his boyfriend sort of hating me, at least at first. I threw in Hayes Fisher and his family and finished with Sam being undercover and how much I way more than missed him.

"God, Jory, you're like a ride at the amusement park."

"You mean my life is."

"No, I mean you are."

I grunted.

"You know I always wanted to go to cooking school," he said out of the blue.

"Then you should."

"I really should."

I fell back on the bed, spread-eagled. "You know what I was thinking?"

"No, what?" he asked, lying down beside me, fingers linked behind his head.

"That I wanted to make another go of running my own business.

I think my best friend and I gave up too fast last time. I think maybe we should try again." The idea had been doing laps in my head lately, and I finally had the time to dive into the pool with it.

"Okay."

"But see I really like Fallon, too, you know? I gotta figure that out because he's sorta counting on me, and letting the man down is not an option."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

And I knew that, too, but it hardly mattered. "I'm worried about working for someone else again. I don't do that all that well."

"I'm surprised you work at all."

I rolled my head to look at him. "Why?"

"You get that you're a bit scattered right?"

"Yeah, people say that."

He lifted his eyebrows like maybe they said it a lot.

"I'd flip you off, but then I'd hafta move."

He shook his head. "You know, last night I was working so hard for you to like me because I thought that's what Aaron would want, but today...."

"Not so much with the caring, huh?"

"No."

"The shrimp was really good at that truck. You should've tried it."

He looked at me, and I knew he was deciding. "I will on the way back," he said after a long minute. "It did smell good."

We were silent a long time after that.

"I'm gonna go for a swim," I told him.

"I'm gonna go screw Aaron Sutter's brains out."

"Okay," I said.

He left me alone then, and everything felt better, settled. I changed to go for my swim.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Chapter Thirteen

INSTEAD of being afraid of things that are real, I have always been afraid of things that are not. If I'm walking home and I hear a noise, I'm not thinking stalker, serial killer, I'm thinking werewolf. It's how my brain works. So when I swam out into the Pacific, I wasn't worried, because I never contemplated sharks or rough currents or jellyfish or anything remotely frightening. I was in the water, what could happen?

As I rose and fell with the waves, I felt small in the grand scale of earth and sky and water, and that perspective, as I realized how truly insignificant I was, sort of jogged my brain.

For months I had been thinking about trying to relaunch Harvest Design, my company with Dylan Greer, that I had loved more than anything besides Sam Kage. Ever since I realized that I really did hate my job, and that my boss really didn't like me, I understood that it was just another sign to change my life that I had been ignoring.

Normally I looked for guidance all over, in even the most mundane things, but lately nothing was getting through, and I knew why.

I had been so scared for so long to try again. Having failed once, I didn't want to repeat it, the soul-crushing pain of having to give up on my dream. But after three years away from it, working for other people, being a pinball, a slave to their whim about what I should do and how I should think, I was done. And some people had to endure it, some people didn't

have the choices I did to try and work for themselves not once but twice, and I was so thankful that wasn't me. I was lucky to have resources in my brother and friends, who were there, I knew, waiting for me to grow another spine. So as soon as I got back to shore, if... because, really, it was starting to get a little dark... if I got back to the beach, I was going to finally figure things out.

First off, I had to somehow, someway, take what I hoped for and what I thought Dylan wanted and put that together without running out on Fallon Strauss. Whether the man knew it or not, I was counting him in as being with me, in on my big picture dreams because he had been my safety net, and I wasn't about to leave him alone. I just had to connect all the dots. I was good at figuring out puzzles, and I just needed time to see all options.

So I was thinking, weighing things in my head, and then my right leg cramped. And I was pretty sure I saw a fin. And I remembered that when I had changed the billing on my room to my credit card from Aaron's, that they had told me that the B&B was close to Shark's Cove and Waimea Bay. I had no idea where I was currently, but tiger sharks and mako sharks were not out of the question. Great White... probably not, but that did not preclude some prehistoric horror rising from the deep. I started to hear the theme music from *Jaws* in my head.

Eaten by sharks... Sam would never forgive me. When I saw the boat, I waved. The man who pulled me from the water was big and tall, and his hair fell to the middle of his back in a long, thick braid.

His salt-and-pepper beard and mustache were neatly trimmed, and his eyes under a Pittsburgh Steelers baseball cap were squinted.

"Eh! You know get sharks in da water."

I liked the pidgin I had been hearing since I got to the islands. It was a warm dialect that I would never, ever, in my life attempt to duplicate, like I sometimes tried with others. How many times had I made Dylan live through Irish Accent Day or Jamaican Accent Day with horrible results? But the sound made me feel kind of at home.

"You heard?"

"Sharks?" I asked tentatively.

He nodded.

"No, sir, I didn't know there were sharks out here," I said, my teeth chattering.

He grabbed a beach towel and then another, dropping one on my head and draping the other around my back.

"Thank you."

He grunted the way all men did when faced with my specific brand of stupidity. They made a noise agreeing that I was a dumbass.

"Strong, you know, da current, can pull you under and drown you."

I nodded.

"You like eat?"

There was more nodding from me, because really, getting fed was the number one way to get to know people. The second best one was to play their sports, but I wasn't really up for that, and from the look of the hat, I was betting that his sport was football and that one I already knew about. Every Saturday and Sunday in the fall, the TV was on at my house with some game that Sam *had* to watch. College football on the first day of the weekend, and the pros played on the Sabbath. I didn't need to play football to understand the inner workings of my good Samaritan, what I needed to do was eat whatever he offered and ask for more.

It turned out that he was meeting people on the beach to barbecue and camp, which apparently you had to have a permit for, and sit around and eat and drink and hang out. He was bringing the fish. His name was Tetsuo Nakamura, and when I told him that he did not look Japanese in the least,

he smiled at me. The man was easily six-three, muscular and broad shouldered, and I guessed late fifties, early sixties. It turned out he was seventy-two, which I told him was amazing. His mother was half haole, which to him meant "white" but was supposed to just mean "visitor," and half Hawaiian. His father had been Japanese.

"You look pure Hawaiian to me," I told him.

"No more pure Hawaiians," he told me. "And just 'cause you from Hawaii no make you Hawaiian."

"Yes, sir."

"I like you, you get plenty respect. Come."

It was loud and noisy, and the barbecue smelled so good I was salivating. Nothing makes you more tired and hungry than swimming.

Kids come out of the water like ravenous beasts, and I was no exception.

"Tetsuo, who your friend?"

And he explained how stupid I was, where I had been swimming, and how far out. One of the women, Ku'uipo, shortened to just Ipo, pointed to where the cold water beach shower was, about fifty yards away, and told me that I needed to get the salt water off me and she had clothes that would fit.

I tried to explain where I was staying, but she shut me down like women do and pointed.

I went.

When I got back, with the towel wrapped around my waist and sandy feet, the rest of me rinsed, she had a pair of dry board shorts and a T-shirt for me to change into. They both smelled like laundry detergent, which I hoped would cloak my own man stink.

"I probably reek," I told her.

"You smell like the ocean," she told me, "that's okay, yeah?"

I hoped it was.

She put me in a chair that you usually watched little kids play soccer in, or other sporting events, and gave me a can of Hawaiian Sun Passion Orange to drink as she brought me a plate piled high with food. The guys watching her turned their eyes on me when she was gone.

"Ho, brah, she like you," the man closest to me said.

"No," I said, smiling at him, "she just wants to feed me since I nearly drowned and all."

"Where you was?"

I had no idea and called over to Tetsuo. He didn't hear me.

"Uncle, where this haole was at?"

"His name Jory," Tetsuo corrected him.

"'Kay, 'den, still, where he was at?"

And he proceeded to tell them where I was, beyond the reef, and I got looks of both respect and squints like I had ridden the short bus to school. Apparently it had been a little dicey out that far.

"Get sharks, you know."

I did know. Now.

"You when grind this kine food before?" another man asked me.

I shook my head because I'd never eaten it before, but that hardly mattered. I shoveled whatever the green stuff was into my mouth.

Makana was talking to me, his cousin Kimo was beside him, and Tommy was on the other side. We were joined by Ioane, who I liked the best until Kawika showed up. Kawika was patient, he explained all about squid luau, the green stuff, and lau lau, which was pork and butter fish wrapped in taro and ti leaves, and fried rice and macaroni salad and fried Aku bones, which was just the middle bone of the fish with meat on it that you picked off, and pipikaula, which was like beef jerky except the pieces were thick and tender.

Everything was amazing, and when I asked Kawika if I could have more, I got a smile, with dimples, and he tipped his head for me to follow him.

The food was all out in aluminum foil pans, and Ipo was there with Lani and another girl named April. I thanked her again for feeding me and told her how amazing all the food was.

"Oh, uncle." She turned back to look at Tetsuo, who was sitting at the grown-up table with all the other men and women his age. "You were right. This one got good manners."

"Yeah, I told you." He smiled, gesturing for me. "Jory, come."

I moved fast and was introduced around the table. They wanted to know where I was staying and where I was from, and I was pleased to hear that one of the men had a grandson going to school at the University of Chicago.

"Well, if there's anything you'd like me to take back for him when I go, just lemme know."

You would have thought I gave the man, Randy Awana, a million dollars.

"You can take food for him?"

"Yessir."

"'Kay, 'den, Jory, I going give you my numba, and you call me the night before you go, and I going get all the stuffs together."

"Absolutely."

I got a hug then, which was nice, and a kiss from Ipo, and more food, which was the best part. When I was sitting back down with Makana and Kawika, I saw another guy looking at me.

"Brian," Makana barked at him. "Why you giving Jory da stink eye for?"

"Eh, sorry." He tipped his head at me. "I was wondering—Ipo like you an' what?"

The girl in question was beautiful with her thick hair that fell in waves to the middle of her back, her gorgeous dark-tanned skin and huge brown eyes. She was flawless and walked with unmistakable grace, the sway of her hips decadent. Her beauty was obvious, but girls didn't do it for me. What was fun was sitting with four buff shirtless men all with smooth sleek skin and hard muscular physiques.

I had friends back home who would have been wildly jealous.

I looked at him.

"Eh, you one mahu?"

My eyes flicked to Kawika for the translation.

"He like know if you like guys."

"Oh." I looked back at Brian. "Yes."

He shrugged. "Good, I goin' tell Ipo. Maybe I get chance den."

"You got no chance," Makana said, snickering. "Ipo only like the kine guys with jobs."

He flipped Makana off, and everyone went back to eating. So I was gay and out, again, and no one gave a damn. I was having a really nice day.

I wasn't far from the B&B, it turned out. It was a quick drive around a long curve, over a cool old bridge, and down the side of the road. There were no turn-offs or drives, the entrance was just there, a right off the road, and if you missed it, you had to drive back to where the Foodland and the McDonalds was, turn around, and try it again.

The highway was only two lanes, and apparently on the weekend, traffic slowed to a crawl with people trying to get to Waimea Bay.

"Get plenty rain this time of year," Tommy was telling me as he navigated the pickup truck down the road later that night.

He had a reason for bringing the subject up. I just didn't know what it was yet.

"The waves from now get huge, yeah, Jory," Kawika chimed in, cautioning me. "You no can be out there like you was today. Lucky uncle when see you."

Yes, it was.

"Pretty soon they come, like, thirty feet." Kawika looked at me in the rearview mirror. "I no like see you on the news, yeah?"

They were surfers, both of them, as well as all of the guys we had left back on the beach, and so if they said the waves would be big, the chances were good that I would actually see swells that could easily drown me.

"I'll be more careful," I assured both of the men trying to caution me.

When they let me out in front of the main house, I thanked them both, again, as I had everyone I had spent a lovely evening with.

"You get Uncle Randy's numba for take the stuffs to Moses?"

"Yeah, I've got it."

"'Kay, 'den." Kawika smiled and leaned in and grabbed me.

He squeezed me really tight and then gave me the hard guy thump on the back. Tommy did the same and smiled big. I got a shaka sign from both men as they left and a horn blast before they pulled out onto the highway.

I trudged to my cottage and flipped on the lights. I was lucky the porch was open because otherwise I would have been locked out and—God, I had no idea a cockroach could even get that big.

Holy crap!

And just when I was calming down from the surprise factor, it flew.

Flew.

Like a bat.

There was a minute of panic because it could land on me, and then I'd have to take lye to my own skin, but I calmed, grabbed a shoe, and after much chasing, lots of jumping on the bed, and turning on every light in the room, I finally smacked it and stunned it and then killed it. Jesus. And I remembered from something that they could live for, like, a week without their heads so I flushed the damn thing down the toilet. I washed my hands, like, five times and then took a shower myself. Seriously, the thing was easily four inches long.

Maybe three.

Definitely bigger than two.

For sure three.

I closed the double French doors that led out to the patio and was getting ready to climb into bed when there was a knock. When I opened up, Aaron was there with folded arms, looking pissed.

"What?"

"What? I thought you drowned! All we found was your damn towel on the beach!"

"Oh, yeah, sorry." I yawned loudly, ready to pass out, releasing the door knob as I left him there scowling at me and walked over to my bed and flopped down onto it. "I lost track of time, but I think I had an epiphany while I was treading water earlier today."

"Jory!"

I looked up at him, and he was suddenly there in front of me, going to his knees between mine, so that we were eye to eye. His hands on my face felt nice, and when he stroked my hair back from my eyes, I closed them.

"You're so tired."

I nodded. "Sorry, Sutter, didn't mean to scare you. It's nice that you were worried."

Slowly he fingered the silver chain around my neck. "What is this?"

"It's Saint Jude."

"Isn't he the patron saint of lost causes?"

"I dunno. I just know he watches over policemen."

"I see."

He leaned my head forward, down onto his shoulder, as he massaged my scalp.

"That's quite the tattoo you have."

I sighed deeply. "It's Sam's name."

"Yeah, I saw. Did he ask you to do that?"

"Course not."

He was quiet for a few minutes before he asked, "Why would you ruin your beautiful skin?"

I tried to pull free, but he increased his pressure.

"Sorry, just wait."

And I was going to shove him off me, but he was warm and his fingers felt good digging into the back of my neck.

"It actually looks like some big signature on your shoulder."

"That's what I was going for."

"How long have you had it?"

"Three, almost four years."

"The ring wasn't enough?"

"It was before the ring."

"Jory—"

"You're not really trying to turn Jaden into me, are you?"

The chuckle was deep. "Is that what he thinks?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Then he's much more perceptive than I gave him credit for."

I took a deep breath and fell back onto the bed, arm thrown across my eyes.
"I'll give you a million dollars if you turn off the overhead light."

"Really? You have a million."

I grunted and flipped him off.

The room got a thousand times cooler the second the light clicked off. The lamp on the nightstand was a hurricane one and bathed the room in a soft yellow glow.

"You should have seen the size of the roach in here earlier."

"Roach," he said with a cough, sitting down beside me, his hand smoothing over the T-shirt covering my stomach. I had on my sleep shorts along with it as I had been ready to go to bed.

"Stop that."

"Just be quiet."

"Don't molest me," I said, giggling.

"Mmmm hmmm," he hummed under his breath.

I felt his warm hand slip under the hem of the T-shirt and slide across my bare skin.

"God, Jory, your skin is just as gold and perfect as I remember."

"Move your hand, Aaron."

And his fingers, which had actually felt really good, were gone.

"Thank you. Now go find Jaden and go to sleep."

"I will, just wait a minute."

I could feel my body sinking down into the bed.

"It starts out great, it always does," he said, and his hand was back in my hair, which I considered okay. His fingers smoothed over my eyebrows and down my lashes. "I like a guy, he likes me, but somewhere along the way, I

get bored. Really bored, and then I try and make him into the one guy who never bored me—you."

If Sam Kage let any man but me touch his hair, smooth fingertips down his nose, his lips, I'd lose my mind. The double standard was not fair. "Go sit on the chair," I told him, gently brushing his hand off me.

"Sorry, I'll stop, just let me sit here."

"Aaron—"

"What can I do that won't violate your promise to Sam Kage?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Is a blowjob sex or not?"

"What, are you five?" I teased him, my eyes drifting open as I smiled up at him. "Of course a blowjob is sex. Don't be stupid."

"A kiss? One kiss. Could I have that?"

"Get the fuck out," I said, laughing at him. "Go kiss Jaden."

"I want to kiss you, Jory," he said, leaning down until his lips were hovering over mine. "I want to suck this," he said as his hand, his strong, capable hand, squeezed my cock through the thin cotton of my sleep shorts.

"Fuck," I groaned, shuddering.

"Oh, baby, please," he said, and he let me go, I knew, right before he would peel off my night clothes and take me into his hot, wet mouth.

We had done it so many times in the past. Aaron Sutter loved to give head, loved the feel of a dick sliding over his tongue, pushing against the back of his throat, and loved the taste of come as he swallowed it. He had once gone to his knees at a restaurant for me, my thighs spread under the table, belt loosened, button free. The slide of the zipper, that sound, had thrilled me.

His fingers would slip just a fraction into my hole, his tongue making everything wet and slick with saliva. All the time I was begged to fuck his mouth, make him gag if I could. But then he would stop. There had never been the next piece I needed, wanted, even though I had voiced what it was that would make me scream his name more than once.

When Sam sucked me off, he wouldn't stop until I came. Once I did, he would shove his tongue in my hole and give me the deep rimming I craved. As I panted his name, stretched and ready, he would pull back, slide two lubed fingers deep inside me, scissoring, before filling my channel with his long, hard, thick cock. I would be manhandled, my thighs pressed to my chest as he pounded into me until I could feel him in my core. The climax, my second, his first, could normally be heard as well as felt since I was a very noisy lover.

"Fuck!" I yelled, my whole body screaming for the man I loved.

I was hard and aching and throbbing, and so giving Aaron Sutter the wrong damn message.

I didn't want him. I wanted Sam. It was only ever Sam.

His fingers slid under the elastic waistband of my sleep shorts.

"Jory, baby, I'm going to make you feel so good."

Shit shit shit!

I scrambled back fast, fell off the side, hit the floor, and crawled underneath the bed.

"Jory, what the hell are you doing?" he yelled at me.

I was under the bed, and the reality of the situation made me laugh. I couldn't help it. Ridiculous. I was such a space cadet. You didn't think about one man while another was trying to seduce you.

How stupid was that?

The door flung open then, bounced off the wall, and I saw feet from where I was, but that was it.

"Aaron, what the fuck?"

"Jaden, what are you doing in here?"

"What are you doing in here, and where the hell is Jory?"

Jory was under the bed, but I wasn't going to tell him that, and my guess was that neither was Aaron.

"I wanted to talk to him, but I can do it in the morning."

"Oh." He calmed, surprised. "He's not here?"

"No."

"Yeah, but is he okay? I know you were worried." All trace of anger was gone since there was no sign of me.

"He's fine. His stuff's here, and it looks like he took a shower.

Let's go back to our room and talk, okay?"

"Sure," Jaden agreed.

When the door closed, I climbed out from under the bed, locked myself in, turned off all the lights, and got in bed. I was passed out in seconds.

I dreamed about Sam Kage.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Chapter Fourteen

THE first thing I did when I woke up was roll over and call Dylan.

Since there was a five-hour time difference, it was already after lunch, her time.

"What?" she asked me when I would let her get a word in edgewise.

And I outlined what I wanted to do, how the only person besides me I could ever work for was Dane, but that I really didn't want to do that for the rest of my life, work for my older brother and live in his shadow.

"But, honey, we already tried to have our own company."

"We gave up too easy, D," I told her. "I mean, I always figure that—"

"You'll fail," she told me.

"Yeah."

"I know you do. Somewhere along the line, you actually started believing that Jory's-so-stupid crap."

"But I'm not and you're not, and I think if it's just you and me, no one else's voice in the mix... and we hire a couple people this time," I said, smiling into the phone.

"Why are you screwing with me when you know I want this so bad?"

She did? "You do?"

"Of course I do."

"But you never said anything."

"Because what would be the point? Just to make you feel bad?"

"God, I *am* stupid."

"But you're not stupid like you don't know what the hell you're doing. You're stupid like you have no confidence, and you should, because you're amazing when you try. The problem is you so seldom actually try."

"And you wanna go into business with a guy like that?"

"I totally do. I trust that guy with my life."

"Why?"

"Because I know he'll do everything in his power to make sure we succeed."

"I love Aubrey," I told her.

"I do too," she agreed, "but she's totally loving her new job at the art gallery, and she only does it three days a week now that she's married to Rick."

I had introduced my friend Aubrey Jenner to her husband three years ago. They had gotten married six months later.

"Would it be okay, you think?"

"I do."

It was seamless when I talked to my best friends. Dylan had followed my jump easily. I was thinking about our business that Aubrey Jenner had been a part of, but me saying that I loved her had meant that I really didn't want to go back in business with her. The "loved" conveyed the unspoken "but." The "but" said that this time it had to be different. And because Dylan was Dylan, when the train veered off track, she didn't miss a beat.

"So she's not gonna be pissed if we don't ask her back?"

"Maybe," she sighed. "But I think that was some of the problem last time. There were too many of us trying to make choices, decisions, about everything, and it didn't work."

"Nope."

"You and me—"

"Yep, you and me," I agreed. "And Fallon right?"

"Yeah, Fallon too."

"Because he was my safety net."

"Yes, he was."

"And that was pretty great."

"Yes, it was."

"So yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What do I tell those nice people who just hired me?"

"But they didn't actually hire you yet," she reminded me. "I mean, they promised to, but you haven't signed anything."

True.

"Tell them that you can work for them on a consulting basis, and they only have to pay you when you deliver an account but don't have to give you a salary."

"Oh." I thought a minute. "They might actually like that."

"It's called working on commission, dear, and a lot of people like it."

"So they wouldn't even have to pay me medical benefits or anything."

"Nope."

"Why would anyone not be down for that?"

"I have no idea."

"What if Fallon isn't down for it?"

"You won't know unless you ask."

"I want him to be in."

"So ask him."

"Shit. Fallon's gonna tell me to screw myself."

"Or," she said thoughtfully, "maybe Fallon would like the option of working with you when he wants but not when he doesn't, and if he wants to come work with us... I've always had a lot of respect for Fallon."

"You have?"

"He has a flawless reputation."

"He does?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why didn't you tell me you were crushing on Fallon?"

"Because you're my gay boyfriend, and I didn't want you to get jealous."

"But Fallon can't be a partner."

"He can if he brings his own clients and collateral to the table.

The thing with Aubrey was that we paid her as an employee, but we treated her like a partner and gave her a voice in the company. We went from two to three with no infusion of funds. She never invested anything but her time."

"That was a big deal."

"Yes, but maybe if she'd had to buy in, that would have bought us more time, bunny."

"You've thought about this."

"I have."

"You hate being where you are."

"Yes, I do."

"I just don't know if I can do what I hate at a new place, even if it's with Fal. It's like hanging curtains in hell, you know?"

"Yep, I totally get it."

"So, what, I should call him?"

"Call Fallon. If he needs me to go see him, I will."

"You will?"

"Hell, yeah."

"I really love you," I sighed.

"I know."

"Do you think there's anything wrong with me?"

"Nothing permanent."

I thought about that.

"You're the only person I know who's been flipped off by an ambulance driver," she said.

"Which has what to do with what we're talking about?"

"It just makes you, you."

"I thought he was gonna park."

She started laughing, and I hung up and called Fallon Strauss.

"Hey, Jory, are you—"

"Could you let me talk to you and not say one word until I'm completely done?"

"Oh, God—"

"Please, Fal."

He sighed deeply, but he agreed.

As a rule, I could talk really fast when I wanted, and breathing became unnecessary. I started with the fact that my life was sort of currently under construction and ended, twenty minutes later, with how I had to ditch the bad parts and build on the good.

He was a good part, and Dylan thought so too.

"Let me get this straight," he growled at me. "You want me to jump into the deep end with you simply on faith and conviction, and hope that hard work and a good reputation will be enough to carry us?"

"Pretty much."

"Jor—"

"Will you just talk to Dylan before you make up your mind?"

"I—"

"Please, Fal."

"Is this what it's like living in your world? It's like a goddamn rollercoaster?"

What was I going to do? Lie? "Yeah, a little."

"A little?" He was incredulous.

"Please, Fal, I'm ready to really try this time. I mean, I was last time, too, but last time, when we hit a bumpy patch, I was like yeah, okay, throw in the towel, because I figured it was me and I was gonna fuck up anyway, you know? Better to just have the exercise in terror be over, me being a grown-up and all."

"And now?"

"Now I know what I'm doing, and I have a way that I wanna treat people that I think they will respond to. I don't want my ethics dependent on the bottom line of money anymore. I want to do the right thing by folks all the time, and if I run my own company, I can, and I think that will be really good. I just—"

"Jory—"

"It's kind of your fault, Fal."

"Mine?"

"Yeah. You see me. Only Sam and Dane and Dylan and Aja really see me, you know? There's, like, five of you in the whole world that don't think I'm a total fuck up."

"Oh, God."

"And Shane, right?" I teased him. "Shane digs me, right?"

"Yeah, he kind of—"

"And my friend Evan and his boyfriend Loudon, them too. They see me."

"Jory—"

"Doesn't Shane want you to be your own boss?"

"Well, yeah, he always says that—"

"Pretty please with sugar and honey, see Dylan."

"Sugar and honey?"

"Fal—"

"Fuck!"

Oh yes, I had him! "Today. Will you see her today?"

"Fuck fuck fuck."

"Fal?"

"When?"

"Sit down, have a drink, I'll call you right back."

"I'm such an idiot! Why do I listen to you?"

"Cause it's better when we're together, Fal."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

He groaned loudly, and I hung up and called Dylan back. I could hear from how breathless she was that she was getting excited.

"You're so happy, D."

"I've just been waiting on you to wake up."

"You could've shaken me."

"Nope, you had to find the confidence yourself. What did it?"

"I've been thinking about it for months, but yesterday... yesterday, when I was in the ocean all by myself, I felt like I was nothing, you know?"

"And you wanted to be more."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"I mean, I'm not living with some delusion that me running my own business will realign the planets or bring about world peace or whatever, but I think maybe if I was happier with me, then I wouldn't be looking for Sam to be perfect, or everybody else."

"If I was happy at work, I wouldn't be such a bitch at home."

"What did your husband say? How does Christopher feel about you and me back in the saddle again?"

"He thinks it's about damn time."

"God."

"I have money put away, J."

"Me too, some."

"And the rest?"

"See what Fal says. You gotta go see him."

"Where is he? I'll leave now."

I took a deep breath. "We'll have to get another loan."

"No," she told me. "This time we take the help that everyone offered the last time but that our pride wouldn't allow us to accept."

"Christ."

"We were idiots."

Dane had been really hurt that I had not asked him to invest in me when I had opened my own business. "Yes, we were," I agreed.

"I'll talk to my brother."

"I'll talk to mine," she told me.

"God, we're really gonna do this, that fast."

"Please, your whole life happens this fast. That's the fun of living the Jory way."

"The Jory way?"

"Yep, edge of seat, holding your breath, leaping with your eyes wide open —that's what it's all about, but you gotta have the balls to see it through this time, Harcourt."

I nodded.

"I can't see you!"

Shit. "Yes!"

"Okay," she exhaled, "I'm ready to jump."

And bet her life on me, and maybe Fallon Strauss's too. "Oh, God."

"Don't throw up yet, tell me where Fal is."

And I did, and even if he said no, we were doing it, the Jory and Dylan show, redux. I called Dane when I got off the phone with her and just vented after he said hello.

"Breathe," he commanded me.

Apparently I needed to do a lot more of that. "What if Fal doesn't wanna be on board?"

"Then he's an idiot."

"But I committed to a new job, Dane."

"Did you sign a contract?"

"No."

"Then you're not committed yet, Jory, and Dylan's idea about consulting sounds like it would benefit you as much as Benchmark."

"God."

"And maybe Benchmark would like to house the consultants in those new offices they're building."

"No."

"You don't know. You will have to wait and see the breadth of Fallon's vision as well as that of Benchmark. People will surprise you, Jory. You just have to have the courage to take that leap of faith."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because no one can infuse you with belief in yourself.

Confidence comes from within."

"That's very Zen of you."

"One tries."

I tried to calm my racing heart. "How's Aja?"

"Apparently you are to come home and help her paint the nursery."

"I will."

"Why can't painters be hired?"

"Because you ask your family to help out, Dane, to make sure that it gets done with love."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

He grunted.

And I got it that we were talking about baby rooms and business loans all at the same time. He was very sneaky.

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay, I hear you."

"Do you?"

"You're amazing."

"So I've been told."

"And arrogant."

"Again, I've been informed."

"I'll see you when I get home."

"I do not expect you home for another week, Jory. Don't test me."

"I won't."

"Do let me know what Fallon Strauss decides."

"You know who Fallon is?"

"I know everything, Jory."

God, he really did.

"I'm really sorry that I couldn't be there to help you train

Pedro."

"Pedro knows the office and knows what he's doing. He didn't need you here. And this way I can see him like I should, without you as a safety net."

"But still, I promised you I would be there."

"You found me a new assistant, which was what you assured me you would do. That was what I really needed, your commitment and the execution of your word."

"Okay."

"Everything all settled?"

It always was after I talked to Dane.

I hung up, rolled out of the bed, and walked to the patio doors and threw them open. It was another beautiful day in paradise, with the sun and the breeze and the clouds and the deep blue of the ocean. I sucked fragrant air into my lungs and felt my whole life shift back to center.

After I showered and changed, I took my phone and headed over to the main house to get some breakfast. It took me a second to make sure I was awake when I saw Hayes Fisher sitting at a table with Aaron and Jaden and another man I didn't know.

"Jory," Hayes said, getting up, crossing the room to me.

What the hell?

"What're you doing in Hawaii?" he asked me.

"I could ask you the same question."

He shrugged. "A friend of mine, Burke Ellis, invited me to spend the weekend with him and his buddies from college, and since I fired Synergy, I figured what the hell."

"You fired Synergy?" I asked as he took a step closer to me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, I did."

I grinned at him. "They don't find nice guys, huh, only nice girls?"

"Yes, you were right. You're very perceptive."

"Yeah, well, I bet you didn't get your deposit back from them."

"No, I didn't, but it really—what in the hell are you doing here?"

So I explained about lying low, out of the way of a psychotic drug dealer, and how I knew Aaron Sutter.

"You used to date Aaron Sutter of Sutter Industries, Sutter Acquisitions, Sutter that builds hotels all over the world."

"Yep."

"God, no wonder you weren't impressed when I told you I was rich. Compared to him, I'm not."

I shrugged. "I don't give a crap about money."

"Yes, Jory, I know that," he said dryly.

"Tell me someone is still going to renovate your house, though."

"Yes, of course."

"You say of course, but...."

"Yes, Jory, it should be done by the time I get home in two weeks."

"Great. You'll have to let me see it or at least send me pictures."

"Jory, I would love for you to spend lots of time with—"

"Jory!"

I leaned around Hayes, and Aaron was doing the imperial wave, where I should move my ass fast. I squinted at him.

"Jory, let me talk to you," Hayes began.

"Oh, for the love of God, come here!" Aaron yelled at me.

I gave Hayes a quick pat on the arm and scooted by him to get to Aaron. When I was close enough, he grabbed my hand and pulled me down so I had to squat next to his chair.

"Yes, my liege."

"Oh, fuck you," he groused at me, hand fisting in the back of my hair. "How do you know Hayes Fisher?"

"I was working at Synergy, and we were hired to find him a woman."

Jaden's gasp was loud.

"I'm sorry, what?" the man across from Aaron said right before he started choking on his water.

I laughed and rose up, wrapped my arms around Aaron's neck and squeezed tight. I kissed his cheek when I leaned back and apologized for the night before.

"Oh, no, baby, it was my fault," he said, his eyes soft.

"No, it was mine," I said, easing free now that he was hugging me back, leaning sideways to kiss Jaden's cheek before I got up and started for the buffet.

"Wait," he called after me.

I stopped and he stood, catching up with me as Hayes went to the table and was greeted with a volley of questions from Burke Ellis, who I was pretty sure had invited him along for a weekend to Hawaii not because they were just friends. He might have wanted Hayes to meet his friends, but he had romance on his brain, or his reaction to my announcement that Hayes was

bi would not have been met with a near-death experience. He was still coughing from swallowing water down the wrong hole.

"Jory," Jaden said softly, "what were you apologizing for?"

"I was a little needy last night, and I put Aaron in a bad situation. I'm sorry."

"He didn't say he saw you last night."

"Because he didn't want to embarrass me," I told him, which was sort of the truth because the fact that I had let him touch me, even a little, was bad.

"Oh."

"I want pancakes," I told him. "What about you?"

"What bad situation did you put him in?"

"I sort of flirted, and I'm sorry, Jaden. Please forgive me."

He was studying my face.

"Can we get past it?"

"He stopped you or you stopped him?"

"There was no stopping," I lied, because no good could come from it, "because nothing started. It was just flirting."

"Are you going to tell Detective Kage?"

"Of course."

"Will he forgive you?"

Sam would be mad that I had been alone with Aaron Sutter, but he would forgive me because it had ended with me needing him. He always liked

that. "Yes."

He nodded. "I forgive you, Jory, because we both know if you told Aaron right now that you wanted him back and wanted to go to bed with him that he would give me a nice settlement and put me on a plane tomorrow."

"That's bullshit," I told him. "You are everything I wasn't.

Don't kid yourself."

"What?" he scoffed. "I allow myself to be kept and you didn't? I hardly think that qualifies."

I squinted at him.

"You know Hayes Fisher was looking at me this morning, and I saw him, you know, checking me out, but when I smiled at him, he apologized and said that I reminded him of someone else. Well, now I know who he meant."

I didn't want to argue. I wanted to eat. "I'm gonna have banana pancakes."

The way he was looking at me, like I was nuts, made me smile.

Back at the table, I thanked the server for the coffee and guava juice she brought me. It was strange, I had Aaron on my right and

Hayes on my left.

"So, Jory," Burke Ellis said, "why did you leave Synergy?"

"I was fired," I said, smiling at him.

He looked horrified. "Oh."

"It's okay. I had to figure some things out, and you gotta take the good with the bad, you know?"

"I do know," he said with a nod, eyes on mine.

I ate and ate, and when I was still eating, Jaden asked if I was bottomless.

"Dane thinks I have a tapeworm." I smiled at him.

"Is Dane your boyfriend?" Burke asked me.

"My brother," I said with my mouth full.

"His brother is Dane Harcourt," Aaron supplied. "The architect."

"Oh my God, are you kidding?" Burke turned to look at Hayes.

"Haven't you been waiting for, like, six months to see that man?"

He nodded. "Yes, I have, and we had breakfast together not too long ago, he and I, because of Jory."

"Oh, how wonderful."

"Yes, it was," Hayes agreed, hand on my back. "You're going to go into a food coma, you know."

I nodded, but didn't stop eating.

"Jory, we're all heading down to the beach after this. You should come."

And the idea of lying around baking under the hot sun was appealing, but I didn't want to do any more intruding than I already had.

"I think I'm gonna take a walk into town and look for stuff to take home."

"You can do that later," he told me. "Come veg at the beach."

"We're all going snorkeling," Jaden told me. "You should come."

"Not me, no thank you," I told them. "I had enough of the big blue yesterday."

"What do you mean?" Hayes asked me.

"I think the ocean put me on the right path already. Any more is just tempting fate."

"Do you even know what you're talking about?"

But I finally did.

I SPENT the day alone, which was good because when Fallon called and said that yes, he'd roll the dice with me, take a chance and dive in the deep end, I was able to celebrate with shave ice and sushi, which was all I wanted to do. The details, and there were a million, we would do together when I got home. But he liked me, he liked Dylan, and even better, Benchmark liked the idea of paying us when we made something happen and not all the time. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into, but it felt good, right, and when I called, out of the blue, to tell Aubrey, she was thrilled too.

"I'm pregnant, Jory," she told me, and I was happy even though I knew Sam wanted kids, too, and I wondered when and how I was going to manage that for him.

My very traditional man wanted to be a father, and I had to start thinking about the logistics of that. As I walked around Haleiwa Town, the surf shops, the jewelry stores, the restaurants, ice cream, and a fish market, I started thinking about what my life with Sam would look like once I was back to running my own business and he was a deputy marshal. With things settled, a family would be next.

Just the idea of having children with Sam Kage made my stomach twist into knots with anticipation. I wanted that more than he knew. It was the only thing I never worried about that should have probably scared me the most. I really wanted to be somebody's father.

By the time I got back, everyone had returned from their ocean adventure, or so I heard. I didn't go seek anyone out because I had been invited out by Ipo, who I had seen in town, to go dancing with her and Makana and Tommy.

I changed into old faded jeans, a tight black T-shirt, and dress shoes, and they picked me up at six. We went to eat at a Mexican place that made killer shrimp tacos and really good margaritas. I bought and they were really touched, and then we went to this club and danced our asses off. I had Ipo and her friends all over me, and the guys were jealous, and we drank like fish, and I had the best time.

I would have invited the others, but Jaden had told me that the plan had been to visit a friend of Aaron's who lived in Hawaii Kai back on the other side of the island. The house was apparently a five-million-dollar property right on the beach, and he wasn't sure how long they would be there partying. I had been invited along, but I could tell that Jaden didn't really want me there, and I truly had no desire to go. I was having a much better time drinking plantation punch out of jelly jars.

When the club closed down at one, we drove to Tommy's house, and his mother woke up and cooked for us. I apologized, but this was Hawaiian style, people came over at all hours of the day and night, and you welcomed them and made sure they left full. She made us breakfast, sweet bread French toast and eggs and country ham. I helped clean up afterward, and that, more than anything else, was appreciated. I rolled in after three and was headed toward my cottage when I heard voices outside on the veranda.

Surprisingly, Aaron, Hayes, Burke, and three others were out there sitting at a table with open bottles of wine.

"Jory," Aaron sighed, holding out his hand. "Come here."

I walked over to him and noticed immediately how glazed his eyes were.

"How many drinks have you had tonight, Sutter?"

His smile was wicked. "Not just drinks."

I understood. "What did you take?"

"The usual. Made the party better."

"Ecstasy?"

He waggled his eyebrows at me.

"I see."

"Like you've never done it."

"No, I know, not here to judge."

"Jaden did a lot of poppers."

I wondered why. "So, I, um, thought you guys were staying with friends tonight."

"Nope," Hayes chimed in. "We went to the party, did what we wanted, but there was nobody there worth keeping, so we came back."

I turned to Burke. "Could you translate that for me?"

He chuckled. "It was a breeding party, Jory. We all took off our clothes and fucked all night, and I for one am exhausted."

"Nice," I said, smiling. "Did we have safe sex?"

"Oh, of course," he said dismissively. "It's just, you know, lots of guys, some naked, some in bondage gear, whatever."

"Huh."

"They had a swing."

"Which sounds fun," I teased him.

"You've never been to one?"

"What? An orgy?"

"No just, a party where you just screw. An orgy is so decline of the Roman Empire, you know?"

"So last season," I teased him.

"Exactly."

He was funny.

"But really, have you never been in a room with twenty or thirty naked men or been to a sex club or anything?"

"No."

Burke looked over at Aaron. "How is that even possible? You love that scene."

He shrugged, and Burke was back to looking at me.

"Oh, Jory honey, you have no idea what you've been missing out on."

"I'm sure I'll live."

"Tell me you've at least been in a ménage once in your life."

"Nope, never had the desire."

"What about your partners?"

"I dunno. No one's ever mentioned it to me."

"I find that so interesting," Burke said, eyeing Aaron. "And, Jory, honey, it's fun. You can be fucking one guy and taking it from another and sucking some other guy off all at the same time."

"It sounds like a lot of work and way more concentration than I'm capable of."

"I would think you'd have a line of guys wanting to tap your ass, Jory, just like Jaden did tonight."

I turned to look at Aaron.

"Oh, here it comes, the judgment."

"You let other guys screw Jaden?" At least I understood the need for the poppers.

"Jaden does what he wants at those parties, just like I do. And he knows I enjoy watching him get tied up and pounded hard."

He did?

"Jory?"

Since when did Aaron Sutter share?

"J?"

"Sorry."

"Tell me."

"It's nothing."

"No, you have the I-don't-get-it-expression on your face, just spill it."

I squinted at him because, really, I was at a loss. "So you're okay with other men fucking Jaden, with sharing him?"

"As long as I can watch."

"Huh."

"God, I hate it when he does that," Hayes said suddenly from the peanut gallery. "It's so judgmental and condescending."

"Yes, it is," Aaron agreed. "So instead of doing that, he should learn some goddamn manners and spit out his question."

"I just...." I scrutinized him. "It doesn't make a lot of sense."

"What doesn't?"

I had to articulate my question. "Okay, remember that weekend we spent in Napa right before you had to go to Berlin that time?"

"You mean when I wanted you to go with me, but you said you didn't have the money, and when I offered to take you, we—"

"No one gives a shit about the play by play. I was just thinking about those two guys we met, the surgeons, remember?"

He squinted at me.

"And we all hit it off, and we went to dinner with them, and then after we went back to their room for drinks and—"

"Oh," he said, cutting me off, "yeah, I remember."

I stared at him, waiting.

"What?"

"Well, I don't get it, then."

His brows furrowed as he looked up at me.

"I want to hear the story," Burke chimed in.

"There's no story," Aaron told his fraternity brother. "The good doctors wanted Jory and me to have sex with them, and I said no."

"Why not?"

"Were they gross?" Hayes asked, chuckling.

"No, they were both really hot," I told them.

"Just don't—"

"So then why not?" Burke asked him.

He shook his head.

"Aaron?" another guy pressed him.

"I just didn't feel like it, Ken," he told him, identifying the stranger for me.

"You didn't feel like it, or you didn't feel like sharing Jory?"

Burke asked him.

"I knew it would have made Jory uncomfortable," Aaron said finally.

"I think we all know who wasn't comfortable," Ken said snidely.

There was a weird uncomfortable silence before Hayes gestured for me, patting the empty chair beside him.

"Come have a seat."

"Oh, screw you," I told him. "It's almost three thirty in the morning. I'm goin' to bed."

"You look good," Burke told me. "What did you do tonight?"

And after I told them, they all agreed that my night sounded good too. Not as good as getting laid, bottoming and topping for hours, but for sure fun.

"You always have a good time," Aaron told me, reaching up and grabbing hold of my hand. "And you always look hot."

I was in a T-shirt and jeans and black lace-ups. I was the epitome of average. "You're trashed, Sutter," I told him. "You should go to bed."

"And you know all about being trashed, huh, J? How many times did I carry your ass home when we were together?"

"On that note," I said, pulling my hand free. "Good night."

I was across the floor fast and then outside, walking toward my cottage. I had forgotten for a half a second that Aaron Sutter always, invariably, ended up making me feel like shit. It was his gift.

Inside my cottage, I peeled myself out of my clothes and took a long, hot shower. There were no roaches, and I knew there wouldn't be. Ipo had informed me that big ones lived outside, not inside, and that as long as I kept things moderately closed up that I shouldn't have nightly visitors, just one once in a while. Apparently no matter how clean you kept your house, you were going to have bugs. It was the tropics, after all. She said that that late night chirping I had been hearing was a good thing, it meant that the geckos were out, and they ate the roaches. We had played the "what would you rather have in your house" game and came to the joint conclusion that between bugs or lizards, lizards were preferable.

When I came out of the shower, drying my hair, towel wrapped around my waist, I heard the pounding on my door. Aaron was there when I opened it.

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

I squinted at him. "How long have you been out here?"

"Who cares, forgive me."

"Forgive you?"

"Yes."

"Forgive you for being a dick," I said snidely.

"Just—I'm sorry, and you know I never say that to anyone."

And he didn't, which was really too bad.

"Why are you fighting with me?" He grumbled at me.

"I'm not doing anything. It's all you," I assured him.

He scowled, pushed by me, and fell down face first onto my bed. "I wanna sleep here, okay?" he said, slurring his words. "Just fuckin' lemme."

I rolled my eyes as I continued to dry my hair. I left the door open because I figured Jaden would be right along. I was wrong, though. It was Hayes.

"Jory, I wanted to—Oh." He was surprised at finding Aaron, now passed out on my bed, sprawled out. "See if you were all right after he started in on you."

"I'm used to it." I smiled at him. "It always degenerates into that, which is why we're no longer together."

"You realize, of course, that he's crazy about you."

"He might think he is, but he's not."

"Jory, from what he said after you left, you're the only boyfriend he's ever kept just to himself. He said that thinking about other men fucking you, even now, makes him sick."

I nodded.

"I mean tonight all he did was watch, you know? Some men, that's all they do. They sit and jack off, watching, and others are on the floor getting fucked and sucked and everything else."

"Sounds hot."

"No, it doesn't, not to you it doesn't."

"Hey, I watch as much porn as the next—"

"But if you had the chance, would you do porn? Would you agree to be the guy in the swing with nine guys waiting to fuck him?"

"Porn can be just two guys fooling around too, Hayes. Some of the hottest stuff I've ever seen in my life is one guy begging and the other guy giving it to him."

"Yeah, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about a room full of guys going at it. Tonight I watched Jaden get fucked by at least twenty guys. At one point there was a circle around him, and they took turns one after another with him sucking guys off at the same time."

"And did he enjoy that?"

"Aaron enjoyed watching him do it, and Jaden kept checking to make sure he was watching."

"Okay, so he must've enjoyed it, then."

"I have to tell you that when I was fucking him, I was imagining it was you."

"How lovely, thank you."

"Jory," he said, hands on my biceps. "I—"

"Jory!"

I looked across the yard and found the owner of the voice. Jaden was walking fast to reach my door. "Hey," I said, yawning, "can I sleep in your room and you sleep here with him?"

He made a face. "Our bungalow is a lot nicer."

"Then get some of his buddies to move him 'cause I need a bed."

He coughed. "Why is he in here?"

"That should be fairly obvious," Hayes answered him.

"What?"

And I realized that not only was Aaron drunk and drugged off his ass, but so was Jaden. He was having a hard time focusing on me.

"Look at me," I said.

Jaden's eyes were back to being brown with the help of contacts, and I told him that Aaron thought he had gone to his own room.

"What?" Hayes was incredulous.

"You're not helping," I told him, turning back to Jaden. "Go get those guys Aaron was drinking with to come move him. They should still be on the deck."

He nodded. "Okay, Jory, I'll be right back. Sorry about him."

"It's okay, everything's fine."

Once he was gone, I asked Hayes to watch Aaron while I changed into my sleep shorts. When I opened the bathroom door, he was right there.

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine," he said, reaching out, putting a hand on the side of my neck.

I brushed the hand off and moved into the room.

"Jory."

My eyes flicked to Hayes.

"You realize that compared to you, Jaden, though young and pretty and buff, is just a cheap imitation. I mean I have met some beautiful boys in my life, and some of them are kept in much more lavish style than Aaron keeps Jaden, but they're all the same— manicured, tan gym bunnies."

"Make your point."

He took a step forward. "I asked Aaron about you today, and he told me I had no chance at all. He said that you barely allowed him to buy you dinner all the time and that you broke up right after he asked you to move in. He wanted to own you, and you said no."

"Nobody owns me," I said, glaring at him.

"No, I know, it's just that Aaron said that me dating you was some—"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Jory, I just want us to get to know each other. I don't want to be your daddy. I don't want to buy you stuff and dress you up. I really, truly, just want to know you, and I really want to date you and listen to you talk because the rambling soothes me like I don't know what, and—"

"What're you talking about? I can't date anybody."

He chuckled tiredly. "Baby, come on, this detective crap is so old. What detective, Jory? Where is he? You're on vacation alone.

There's no one with you at home or here, and aren't you tired of pretending? Just come on, Jory, come clean. How long's it been over with

you and Sam whatever? How long ago did you guys break up?"

"There's the door." I pointed. "Please use it."

"Jory." He tried to make his voice soothing, closing the distance between us, stepping in front of me, hands on my shoulders. "I know you're scared, but I swear to God, it's time to take another chance on somebody. Let me take you out, and let's see what this could be."

No one was listening to me. I was talking, words were coming out, but—nada. Why was nothing I was saying.... "Oh!" I gasped, which startled Hayes.

"Jory, what—"

I stepped away from him so that his hands, which had settled on my hips, had to move. "You guys are all rich," I said, like of course that explained everything. "You're used to getting whatever the fuck you want, so of course you think that anybody, man or woman, is just ready and panting to get in your life, get in your bed... Jesus how could I forget that?"

"Jory—"

"The ego that you guys must all have...." I shook my head.

"How do you live like that?"

"What? No, that's—"

"It so is," I told him as I heard feet outside and walked to the door and waved.

Jaden was back with three other guys, and together, with effort, they lifted Aaron Sutter, mogul, mega-millionaire and trust-fund baby, up from my bed and out the door.

I shoved Hayes out after them and shut the door in his face.

"This is real mature, Jory," he yelled at me from outside as I locked the deadbolt.

But it was much better than punching him in the face, so I figured I was actually taking the moral high ground. I did flip him off through the door, though, and felt better afterward.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Chapter Fifteen

I WENT for a swim before lunch and was coming out, ready to eat, when I saw everyone else on the veranda. They had all missed breakfast and brunch, and now, around twelve thirty, they had risen, painfully, slowly, with much whimpering and whining, from their coffins. I waved, and Burke was the only one who lifted a hand of greeting.

Walking up the beach from the water, the sand warm but not hot under my feet, I saw Aaron smile at me from behind his oversized sunglasses.

"Hey, Paris, how you doing this morning?" I teased him.

He flipped me off.

"God, Jory," Burke sighed at me.

I looked over at him.

"I'd like to wake up to the sight of you coming out of the water every morning."

It was a nice thing to say.

"Me too," Aaron sighed.

"You're lucky Jaden's still sleeping," another man who I didn't know scoffed before groaning. It was too much movement.

"Tell me, Aaron," Hayes said as he tipped his head, looking at me. "Is Jory that pretty color all over?"

My ex said nothing, and I could tell from the clench of the muscles in his jaw that he wasn't ready yet for banter.

"I bet he is." Hayes leered at me. "And I for one would love to find out."

And that was it.

"Fuck you, Mr. Fisher," I muttered, stalking by the table.

"Jory." Hayes was laughing and groaning at the same time. It hurt to be amused when you were hungover.

I moved fast.

"Jory, fuck! Stop before my head explodes."

Rounding on him, Hayes stopped before he hit me, and the motion made him have to clutch at the wall.

"Shit."

"What?"

"God, it's like I spend every second that I'm with you apologizing."

I turned to go, but he grabbed my bicep, holding tight.

"Just wait, I'm sorry, okay? That was stupid and—"

"Demeaning."

"Yes."

I waited.

"Jory." He backed me up against the wall and then leaned close, braced a hand on the wall, and looked at me. "Last night I was drunk and stupid and —"

"Still are," I told him, levering off the wall.

His hand on my bicep tightened, holding me, and his other hand rose toward my face.

"What the fuck, Hayes," I barked at him, shoving him off me.

"Jory, just let me talk to you," he snapped, reaching for me again.

"You can talk to me without putting your hands on me."

He looked pained, and I understood, again. Here I was a nothing, a nobody, telling him what he could and could not do. And normally people let him have his way, invited him close because of who he was and what he represented. And it wasn't like he had a kept boy like Jaden, not yet, but he bought gifts and dinner and paid for everything, so really it was the same damn thing. He just didn't have anyone living in his house and sleeping in his bed on a day-to-day basis.

"Jory, please, just—"

"If I was some blueblood guy that you were dating, if I was from some rich family, you'd never think of doing anything but courting me."

"Courting you? What are you talk—"

"But because I'm not, you think you can do this, treat me like Aaron treats Jaden, like Aaron used to try and treat me, like a possession."

"No, Jory, I—"

"Aren't you on an extended date with Burke? Didn't he invite you here so you both could get laid?"

He shook his head. "No, Jory, Burke and I are both looking for something else."

"What?"

He cleared his throat. "We went to that party to—"

"Oh." Things became clear. "It was tryouts."

"What? No, it wasn't like that!" He was incredulous.

"It was exactly like that. Fuck everybody, check the fit, I get it."

"That is an incredibly tasteless thing to—"

"But true."

"I—"

"You're looking for your own boy, so you were sampling the goods."

"Jory—"

"I thought you were looking for love, but you're not. You're not looking for the one guy, the love of your life. You're looking for a trophy like Aaron's got."

"I—"

"You should just have Aaron ask Jaden if he has any friends. If any one of them is half as hot as he is, you've got it made."

He just looked at me.

"No? Not sure what kind you want?"

"Jory." His eyes looked pained. "I know what I want."

I squinted at him.

"And what is that shit on your back?"

Oh no...no-no-no.

"Is that a tattoo of—"

"Don't," I warned him.

"Did you tattoo your detective's name on your back?" He laughed in my face. "Turn around let me see."

I felt the anger rise so fast.

"That is so Hollywood to ink somebody's name on you just because you're fucking them and then have to have it removed in six months when they dump you." He snickered. "Jesus, what the hell were you thinking?"

The tattoo of Sam's name had been on the back of my right shoulder for over three years, and I did it because to me, it was a brand. I loved it, and more importantly, Sam did. But Hayes Fisher didn't need to know that. What he did need to know was that he'd crossed the line.

I was done, so when I went to leave and he grabbed me tight, trying to force me to stay, I did the move I knew, that Sam had taught me. I pulled him forward by his collar, pivoted, rolled my left shoulder and yanked him off his feet. He was bigger, but he was still a little drunk, and I had been awake a lot longer. Plus I had leverage on my side.

On the ground, on his back, he gulped for air like a fish out of water.

"Don't fuck with me. I don't like it, and I know your mother."

"Shit," he barely got out. "You do know my mother."

I looked down at him.

"Jesus, you know my whole family."

"Why is this a revelation?"

He didn't get off the ground. I doubted he could manage it, but he tilted his head to really look at me.

"What?"

"Holy shit."

He was having some sort of epiphany there on the veranda, but honestly I didn't really care. I had some sightseeing I wanted to do, and I needed to get started.

"Jory!"

I looked back over to where Aaron was and saw that Jaden had joined him. He was the one who had yelled, the new man in my ex's life, and I noticed instantly that his face was lit up and he was smiling so wide, so happily. He looked like a little kid, unguarded and joyful.

He was pointing down the beach, and when I looked to see what had drawn his interest, I saw him. There, walking toward the veranda, was Sam Kage.

"Oh shit!" I yelled and ran.

Anger forgotten, Hayes forgotten, nothing mattered at all except reaching Sam. All I saw was Sam.

Sam.

He had changed, so he must have found, or been directed to, my room because he was in a short-sleeved shirt and cargo shorts, and he was barefoot.

Normally Sam's skin was a light tan but in the sun, if we stayed for several days in Hawaii, he would turn a warm honey brown. I had seen it when we

took a vacation to Florida the year before to visit some old friends of his. I couldn't wait to watch him bake on the beach and even more, just have him close so I could see him.

As it was, watching him come toward me, shirt open, fluttering in the breeze, he looked amazing. His hair was shorn into a military buzz cut, all the fake black hair gone so all you noticed now were the chiseled features, the long straight nose, full lips, and strong, square jaw. He looked massive striding closer, with his broad shoulders, bulging biceps, triceps, the carved chest and rippling torso. I loved his fuzzy legs, long and hard with thick muscle. My mouth watered just looking at the man.

"Come here!" he yelled at me.

I realized I had stopped moving to admire him, and he wanted me there, with him. When I was close, I launched myself into his arms.

He caught me easily, plucked me from the air, and crushed me against him, pressing his face down in my shoulder.

"You're early."

"I told them I was out. There was no reason to stay."

I trembled in his strong arms, loving the feel of him, his warmth, his size. He carried me around the side of the house, away from prying eyes, and shoved me up against the wall, pinning me there. I lifted when he bent to kiss me, thrilled as he slanted his mouth down over mine. Parting my lips, I moaned loudly as our tongues tangled, rubbing, pressing. The kiss got hot so fast, deep and ravaging, and one of his hands sank into my hair, the other kneading my ass hard. I could feel the need in him, and when he lifted me, I wrapped my legs around his back.

"I came to find you," he said, his voice husky as his hot breath touched my ear. He ran his nose down the side of my neck, nibbling, sucking, licking, driving me right out of my mind.

I was shaking, my entire body heating, flushed with arousal, so that when his hand moved between us, under the waistband of my board shorts, I whimpered out his name.

"Already leaking, J," he said with a chuckle, the rumbling sound so sexy and sultry that I couldn't help but shove my throbbing cock into his fist.

"Sam," I gasped, letting my head fall back as he kissed up the column of my throat. "Just spit in your hand and fuck me," I pleaded, my back bowing, as I felt my body start to ignite.

"Yeah, no," he told me, fisting his hand in my hair, stilling me before he savaged my mouth, kissing me breathless.

When he put me down, I had trouble standing.

"You do the same thing to me," he said, forearm pressed to the wall, his head leaning into it, taking a breath to calm his body down.

"You make my knees go weak."

"I do?"

"Every time you kiss me." He smiled down at me, and I noticed the gold stubble on his upper lip. Everything about the man was gorgeous, and as I touched his face, he closed his eyes.

"You love me."

"I'm a stupid fuck who knows better than to leave you alone."

He released a deep breath. "It won't happen again. We were apart for three years, and I hated every fuckin' minute of it. You'd think I'd learn my damn lesson."

"Oh, God," I said, but it wasn't the good kind. I had just gotten a good look at the bruises on his face, and the ugly patches on his chest and torso.

"I'm fine," he insisted, leaning forward, rubbing his stubbled cheek over my smooth one before kissing the curve of my shoulder.

"Are you sure?"

"I promise," he soothed me, holding up his hand for me because he knew it was important.

I sighed deeply. "Your ring."

"Where it belongs," he said, and I was thrilled to see the platinum band that matched mine back where it was supposed to be, fitting snugly on the ring finger of his left hand.

"It looks good."

"Yes, it does."

"Come get in bed with me."

"Love to."

I was so happy, I was sure I was glowing, but when I tried to pull him around the house after me, he wouldn't let me.

"I thought you wanted to—"

"Lemme meet your friends."

"Sam," I groaned, "you know they're not my—"

"Come on," he cut me off, dragging me after him up the stairs.

Hayes was there.

"Is this the detective, Jory?"

I nodded, my eyes all over Sam Kage.

"It's a pleasure, detective," Hayes said, offering Sam his hand.

Detective Kage towered over Hayes Fisher, massive in comparison, and I watched Hayes take in the wall of hard muscle that was my man.

"Hi." Jaden was beaming and thrust his hand at Sam, soaking him up, his eyes missing nothing. "I'm Jaden."

"Pleasure," Sam said, the deep resonant voice sounding even better than normal.

"Detective," Aaron said, but didn't offer his hand.

"Mr. Sutter," Sam replied, releasing my hand to curl his arm around my shoulders and tuck me into his side.

Their eyes locked, and after a long minute, Aaron looked away.

And when my own flicked to Jaden, I saw the look of astonishment that was all over his face.

Sam intimidated the hell out of Aaron Sutter. And I understood, because I had been watching people respond to the man for years. It was the strength, not just physical, but mental as well, that he displayed with such easy confidence. Sam Kage lived really well in his own skin, and it was rare to find a man who truly did. When Sam wanted to make an impression, when he wanted something from you, he could aim all that charm, intellect, and warmth, and focus it at once. And then it was overwhelming, and everyone did whatever the hell he wanted. Dane was the exact same way, both of them devastating, the power just wielded differently. Sam was obvious about it, and Dane more subtle.

"So." Aaron cleared his throat. "Would you like to join us for lunch?"

"No, thanks," Sam said, clutching me tight. "I have a lot to talk to Jory about, so if you'll excuse us...."

"Of course," Aaron said, stepping aside so Sam could steer me toward the inside of the main house.

He bent and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck, which made me hiss in my breath and left no doubt in anyone's mind what he wanted.

I didn't give a damn.

On the way to the cottage, he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles.

"Oh, you did miss me," I teased him.

"Shut up," he growled at me. "All those assholes lookin' at you like you're food, fuck them."

And I understood then why Sam had not just ducked around the side of the house with me and made a quick getaway. He had purposely walked me up the stairs to see the others. He wanted them to see us together.

Sam had kissed me hard and long, so my lips were red and swollen. He had bitten me and sucked my skin to leave marks. My detective was a very primal man, and so he had let everyone see that I was claimed, that I belonged to him.

"I wear a ring, you know," I said, talking to him like the dialogue had been out loud and not just in my head.

"But they don't care." He picked it up because he had been thinking the exact same thing. "It doesn't mean shit to them, so this way they can see. I wonder if anyone wants to come and watch us."

"I'm sure Jaden would like to do more than just watch you do anything."

"Which one was Jaden?"

"The younger, hotter version of me."

He stopped so fast I almost stumbled, but he caught me and gently, tenderly, took my face in his hands. Looking up into his eyes, I saw how heavy-lidded they were.

"I wasn't fishing."

"I know, I can tell from how you said it," he said, fingers sliding over my jaw, down my throat, as he bent and kissed my forehead, the bridge of my nose, and then my cheek.

His lips just barely touched me, but my stomach tightened and my breath caught.

"I know you worry about getting older, about not being the prettiest guy in the room anymore."

And I worried about aging, but not how he thought. I had never presumed I was prettiest, just one of many. My only concern now was that Sam Kage thought I was hot.

"But there will never come a time when that will be the case," he said, pressing soft kisses to the side of my neck.

I leaned my head back so he could reach more of my throat.

"To me, Jory," he said, "you're more beautiful now than you ever have been, and I can't wait to see what you're gonna look like at forty and fifty and sixty, and God willing a lot more numbers after that."

"Many after that," I assured him as my eyes drifted open so I could look up into his smoky-blue ones.

"The most important thing is that you're mine, you belong to me," he said, his hands pressing me closer before he kissed me.

My heart, like it did every single time, skipped a beat and stopped. I wrapped my arms around his neck, not caring where we were, who could

see, just kissing the man I loved, our lips melting together as I moaned deeply, offering submission.

The sound sent a tremor through his powerful frame, and I smiled against his mouth, arching up into him.

"Jory," he growled against my mouth, pulling back just enough, putting a breath of space between us. "Baby, I don't even see anybody but you. Do you even fuckin' get that?"

I did.

"Where's the damn bungalow?"

"It's a cottage," I corrected him as he took my hand and tugged me after him.

"I give a shit."

"Don't swear."

His signature grunt was all I got.

"Aaron Sutter was in my room," I said as we walked.

"And?"

"And I thought you should know, is all."

"Okay. Did you let him kiss you?"

"No."

"Touch you?"

"He grabbed me, but I stopped him, and then I rolled off the bed and hid under it."

He stopped walking and turned to look at me. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Are you listening?"

"I wasn't, but I am now."

I shot him a look.

"Just tell me."

I huffed out a breath. "Well, so, we were talking, and then he—"

"You know what," he said, cutting me off, "never mind, it doesn't matter."

"Sam—"

"No." He put up his hand. "It doesn't matter. Nothing happened, right?"

"Of course not."

He shrugged broad shoulders. "Yeah, see, it's fine. I got groped a ton of times by a lot of women when I was undercover. I even had to kiss one to —"

"What?" I yelled at him. "I got the hell away from Aaron because I knew that if anyone touched you I would lose my mind, and it was not fair to ask you to understand that he had done it just because he's my ex!"

"Breathe," he said, chuckling.

"Fuck you and your breathing!" I yelled again, shoving him away as well as his hands when he reached for me.

"You're cute all jealous and possessive."

"Sam!"

He lunged forward, grabbed me, and kissed me until I was breathless and panting and I was unsteady on my feet.

"We both know I didn't do anything," he said, staring down into my eyes.

I was held there as firmly in his gaze as I was in his arms.

"And do you think after all this time that I don't know I'm the only one?"

There was no way he didn't know. The years between us spoke to that truth. I couldn't speak. I could barely breathe as his hands rubbed up and down my arms.

"You know I know, right?"

"Yes."

"So why would I worry, then?"

He wouldn't.

"I love you, I only want you, and I know it goes both ways. Are we done?"

"Yes, we're done."

"Good."

As I suspected, he had a key and opened the door and shoved me inside, locking it behind him.

"I should take a shower," I told him. "I'm covered in salt water."

When he didn't answer, I turned to look at him and he pounced on me. I was laughing as I went down under him on the queen-size bed, his face nuzzling at my now-hardening cock through the nylon of the board shorts.

"What're you doing?"

"Stop giggling and squirming and take it like a man."

Which sent me into peals of laughter as his face broke into a huge mischievous grin that made his dark smoky-blue eyes sparkle.

"Sam!" I gasped as he yanked my board shorts off my hips and my hard, needy cock sprang free.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said as he fisted my shaft.

My back bowed up off the bed, and his other hand slid under my ass and squeezed tight. The way he touched me, every time he touched me, showed possessiveness and ownership, and no one but Sam Kage had ever treated me like that, like I was his. Aaron Sutter had talked a good game, but Sam made me feel it.

"Kiss me."

Normally the kissing came afterward, slow and languid, once the passion was burned off. In bed, Sam normally wanted me under him, buried in me fast.

I reached for him and he stretched out beside me, him still fully clothed and me naked. When my lips touched his, I heard a deep sigh rise up out of him. He loved it when I took control and what started out tender and soft soon became devouring and hot. But he seemed content to kiss me, one long wet, tongue-tangling, bruising kiss after another, hand on the back of my neck, the other on my ass, petting me.

I felt the tingling sensation begin in the base of my spine, felt my balls tighten, my cock harden almost painfully as I began to grind against him. When his fingers trailed over the length of me, I tore my mouth from his.

"Could you do me a favor?" I panted as he nuzzled the side of my neck.

"What's that?" he asked as he began slowly stroking me.

I shivered hard. "Would you please just fuck me already?"

"Yeah?"

I got it then. It had taken me a minute because his nearness had short-circuited my brain. Even though he had told me I was special, he had to show me too. Show me that I wasn't just the guy he wanted to screw, but the guy he wanted to make love to.

"Idiot," I told him. "I know all about your heart already."

The shuddering breath he took made me smile before he flipped me over on my stomach and licked a wet trail down my spine.

"Sam, what're you—"

"You taste like the ocean," he growled, sucking, nibbling, until he reached my ass, spreading my cheeks before his tongue invaded me on a quick thrust into my body.

"Sam!" I yelled, jolting under the siege, the push deeper inside garbling the rest of my words.

His chuckle was evil as the thrusting became rhythmic, pushing, laving, as he used the hand not digging into my hip to tug gently on my cock.

"Gonna come." I writhed, twisted and then gasped when he withdrew his tongue and replaced it with slippery, lube-slicked fingers. I was so out of it, so far gone, that I hadn't even heard the snick of the pop-top of the bottle. When he slid his fingers over my prostate, once and then again, I cried out his name before my body clenched tight and then came in a hurtling rush. It was a splintering orgasm, and I would have collapsed if he hadn't had his hands on me.

With his lips and his fingers and his tongue, he had driven me right out of my mind.

I spurted on the bed, my balls emptying in a shivering, consuming release that was still racking my body with aftershocks as Sam lifted my hips and buried himself to the hilt in my ass.

He hammered into me, hard, and deep, and I begged him not to stop, never to stop. When he came minutes later, I felt the hot liquid heat fill my rippling channel and then run down the back of my thighs.

"So fuckin' hot."

"Sam?"

"Your body takes all of me and holds me tight and then quivers when we're done. Do you have any idea how fuckin' hot that is?"

His words were scorching, delivered in his low, seductive growl that brought tears to my eyes as he leaned over, pressed his chest to my back, and wrapped his arms around me tight.

"You're shaking." His voice was hoarse.

I could barely breathe.

Slowly, tenderly, he eased from my body that wanted to hold him, keep him close, and when my muscles released him, gone was that feeling of weight and fullness that I craved.

He rolled over on his back and pulled me down into his arms, hugging me tight, burying his face in my hair. I trembled against him, and he held me until my body calmed and I stopped.

"You know, when we're together like that, I can feel how much you love me, trust me. It's a gift."

I tilted my head back and he kissed me, and it was tender and claiming and all that I needed. They were not the passionate, smothering kisses of earlier;

the surging arousal was gone, replaced by the swell of feeling, the contentment of love.

I never loved any man before Sam Kage. There was only him for me. "I love you."

"Me too." He yawned and I smiled wide.

He was exhausted and sated, and he had me warm and naked in his arms. It was time to take a nap.

"I should take a shower," I said into the side of his neck.

He grunted.

I closed my eyes and gave up on the idea of moving.

SAM had ordered room service, and so we were both still naked, no showering had happened, and we were lying on the bed, talking, with platters of food between us. The topics of conversation had ranged from me and Dylan making another go at our business to Sam explaining about WITSEC, witness protection, and what that involved.

Since Sam's old partner, Dominic Kairov, had been placed in the program and given a new identity, I told him I was surprised that they had let Sam become a deputy. But apparently the US Marshal Service was happy to have Sam Kage, and it wasn't like the movies, and you couldn't just look up anybody you wanted to. You had to have a reason and clearance to go rummaging in files for people and cases that weren't assigned to you.

"You always look so crushed," he said, smiling at me, hand in my hair, thumb smoothing over my eyebrow, "when you find out that things aren't like they are in the movies and on TV."

I got to my hands and knees, leaned forward, and kissed him. He opened for me, and I tasted him, his mouth, and sucked on his tongue.

When he broke the kiss and crawled up the bed, I followed. He turned over, leaned back against the Koa-wood headboard, and reached for me. Still slick with come and lube from earlier, still stretched, I crawled into his lap, straddling his hips, and then reached behind me for his already hardened shaft.

"Take me in."

Lifting up, I lined his cock up with my hole and then slowly lowered myself over him until he was fully seated inside. Impaled on the long, hard, thick length of him, I moaned deeply.

The man's eyes were locked on mine, and as I rose up and eased back down, my muscles contracting around him, flexing tight and then easing, his breath got choppy.

I put my hands on his chest as he gripped my thighs and eased me forward. My head lolled back on my shoulders.

"I love watching you do this."

I knew that.

"Nothing—oh," he gasped, and a shiver raced through him that I felt and loved. "Jory," he moaned as he wrapped his fingers around my cock and stroked me fast.

I came hard, spurting over his carved abdomen, and he bucked up into me, pressing me down at the same time; his grip on my thighs would leave the bruises that I coveted.

"Jory," he whispered.

His lips were captured, ravaged, and devoured. He kissed me back until he had to pull free to gulp air into his lungs.

"We really gotta take a shower," I chuckled as we panted together.

"Water, first."

And drinking, pouring him a glass, watching it run down his chin, off his jaw, run over his chest, was too much of a treat to leave.

"That was hot."

I was under him seconds later, my appreciation translating to desire, and my legs were wrapped around him as he pressed his body to mine. Infused with happiness because he was there, I kissed his eyes, his nose, his cheeks, and finally his lips. His skin, the smell of him that clung to me, the feel of him in my arms... I told him that I could die happy right then and there.

"No dying." The sensual growl came again as he pushed his face against the side of my neck. "Just living."

I cleared my throat, because it was now or never. "What do you think about adopting, Sam?"

He lifted his head up and looked down at me. "I'm sorry?"

"I was thinking that I don't want a surrogate or anything else that we've ever talked about because what I really want is to adopt.

What do you think?"

His eyes searched my face. "I think that's perfect. I've seen so many kids without fathers, and we could give a kid two."

I nodded as tears filled my eyes and rolled back into my ears.

Strong, gentle hands brushed them away. "Why were you afraid to tell me you didn't want a surrogate?"

"Cause I thought you only wanted a child that shared some DNA with you, and I didn't want to kill that dream if you wanted it that bad."

He smiled down at me. "I don't give a crap about that. A kid doesn't have to look like me for me to love them. The only thing that matters is that I'll have my own family with you, and that's all I ever wanted."

I nodded fast.

"You get that, right?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay, so...." He arched an eyebrow for me. "When we get home, we can get the adoption process started, huh?"

"I think we should. I'm gonna be thirty-one."

He rolled his eyes before he bent and hugged me so tight I squeaked.

"That was adorable."

It was my turn to growl at him.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Chapter Sixteen

TOGETHER, we had run outside in the moonlight, naked, and jumped in the ocean, but we weren't far from the beach and were back inside a half hour or so later. There was showering and sex and sleeping and waking and more sex and more food, and then finally we both passed out sometime after midnight. With my body sated, my brain finally shut down, and because Sam was spooned around me, plastered to my back, I slept like I never had when he was away.

I woke up late the next morning. Sam was already up, having breakfast on the patio, which I had never even thought of doing, and reading the paper. Staggering out of bed, I got a very amused chuckle.

"Good morning, sunshine."

I scratched my balls and grunted at him.

"That's attractive."

After I sat down, he poured me coffee, and I had a really good piece of seared Ahi and scrambled eggs and fresh papaya. The juice tasted amazing.

"So what's your plan for the day?"

"I don't know," I said after I ate, walking to a hammock I hadn't ever noticed before. "I want to take a drive around the island at some point, and Ipo—"

"Who?"

"New friend," I answered, yawning. "She said I should go to the Polynesian Cultural Center."

"Okay." He was smiling at me as I fell into the hammock. "You planning to take a shower today, ace, since you smell like sweat and sex?"

I grunted and closed my eyes.

His laughter was warm as I heard him turn the pages of the paper. I was uncomfortable, so after a while, I pulled off my sleep shorts and lay naked in the hammock with the warm trade wind brushing over me, safe from the sun, cool in the shade under the awning of the porch. Sam was there, and I was in heaven. I felt drugged and sluggish with happiness.

"Good morn—oh."

"Good morning, Mr. Fisher," Sam said, yawning. "How can I help you?"

"I... wanted to speak to Jory."

"Hold on," he said, and seconds later I felt what was probably Sam's T-shirt fall down over my ass. I was now covered. "Okay, now you can focus."

He cleared his throat. "I wanted to apologize to Jory for—is he asleep?"

"Yep, I wear him out."

"That's very crass."

"The fuck I care what you think," he scoffed. "You're the one who came to tell him, what, sorry for thinking he was full of shit when he was telling you about me? You thought I wasn't in his life anymore, Mr. Fisher, when I am more than in it, I'm the whole fuckin' thing."

"That's awfully conceited of you to think that you're his whole world."

"He's mine too. It goes both ways. We have a life together that, yeah, I let get away from me a little, but don't for a second think that he's available, because that man has been mine since the first time I saw him lying in the street almost ten years ago."

There was throat clearing. "I didn't mean to—"

"The fuck you didn't, you want him."

"He deserves better than the life you're giving him."

And I would have said something at that point, but Sam answered too fast.

"No, he doesn't."

"The hell he—"

"He deserves to be loved, Mr. Fisher, and he is. I can promise you that there's no one alive who loves him more than I do."

"I—"

"I'm sorry I wasn't around for you to see me so you wouldn't get your hopes up that anyone could ever take my place. That's my fault."

"Detective—"

"Please don't come around anymore. I'm asking nicely."

There was a silence, and then Sam's T-shirt was gone, baring my ass before a strong hand squeezed tight. I whimpered as lips were pressed to my right cheek.

"You like that, me gettin' all caveman on him?"

"You were much too eloquent to be compared to a Neanderthal."

He bit down, and I hissed out a breath, my cock hardening fast.

"God, I love your ass," he said, kneading it before he bit the other cheek, harder, and I shuddered. "Maybe I need to show you, huh?" he asked, yanking me up at the same time the hammock tilted, twisted, and finally turned, flipping me out of it and Sam over it as he fought to grab me.

We wound up tangled up together underneath it, Sam's arm caught in it, along with my ankle. I was laughing so hard my ribs hurt.

"Shit, that wasn't sexy at all," Sam groused, tugging at his wrist.

Tears rolled down my face.

"You're really annoying, you know that?"

I nodded because, yeah, I knew.

I WANTED to take him everywhere I had already seen and then go all over the island with him. My plans were huge, but after I took a shower and changed, I found him asleep on the righted hammock. I stretched out close on the chaise and just stared at the water.

"I let you lie for me."

Turning my head, I found Sam's heavy-lidded eyes. "What?"

"I did come see you, and I did put the entire investigation in jeopardy because of what I wanted and needed. I didn't give a damn about anybody else, and then I let you dig me out of it."

"That's what partners do. They take care of each other."

"Doesn't make it right."

"And what should I have done, Sam? Let you get caught? Let your reputation and your career go down the toilet because of something I was one hundred percent a part of?"

"Jory—"

"It's like when the bad guy asks the cop who's undercover, Are you a cop? The cop never says, Yeah, I'm a cop—he lies."

He smiled at me, and the way his lip curled, the way he was looking at me, so full of adoration, sent that flutter of anticipation through me.

"If I had let Cristo Liron win, if I had said it was you, if I had done any of that, who does that serve, Sam?"

"I just never wanted you involved at all."

"No, of course not, why would you?"

"I just wanted you to be safe."

"I know that." I squinted at him.

"You have a question. I can tell," he sighed, smiling at the same time.

"Why isn't it entrapment when a guy says are you a cop and the cop says no?" I asked, having thought about my example and realizing it had not really been a good one.

"It wouldn't be much of an undercover operation if everyone knew who everybody was, now would it?"

"No."

"I'm sorry, though, for that whole scene, J, and I'm sorry you had to have confession time, completely fabricated I might add, in front of everybody."

"When people miss the people they love, I'm sure they all get busy with their toys and stuff, Sam. I just stretched the truth a little bit."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I did my missing of you at home alone and not in a big noisy club," I told him.

"So you had to take care of yourself while I was gone."

"Countless times, yeah."

"Well c'mere," he said, gesturing at me. "And I'll kiss it and make it better."

"Why don't you get off the hammock that craves human blood and we'll talk."

He chuckled as his phone rang. It was sitting in front of me on the table, and when I read the display, I saw "A. Calhoun."

"Sam, I think it's your new best friend," I said as I tossed it to him.

He answered and over the course of the next few seconds, his face fell. When he was done and had clicked the phone off, he turned to me.

"What's wrong?"

"Apparently the case against Cristo Liron has fallen apart."

"I don't understand."

He got up, and the sexy man with the hooded eyes that I had seen minutes before was replaced by an all-business Chicago police detective. "There's missing evidence, missing witnesses... and worst of all, he's free on bond."

"A judge let him out?"

"After the judge heard that the case was weak, he put out a number, and Cristo paid it."

"So he could be anywhere."

"Yes, he could."

I looked at the wide muscular back of the man I loved. "I'm not important enough for him to care about, Sam. Think big picture. He doesn't give a

shit."

"I think he cares more than you think."

"Look at me."

He turned around to face me.

"Maybe we should go home, huh? At least you could protect me better there since you know everybody."

He looked relieved. "Would that be okay with you?"

"Of course." I smiled at him. "Just lemme call Mr. Awana and pick up the things for Moses."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"When I got saved the other day, I promised to carry things back."

"Saved?"

I nodded.

"Carry what?"

"Just food, not guns and drugs."

"I'm so relieved."

I waggled my eyebrows for him. "It's fun living with me, right?"

"It's always an adventure." He chuckled, sitting down beside me, patting my leg. "So you gonna walk me around this town, or what?"

"I feel bad. You're not seeing much of Hawaii but this tiny patch of beach and the inside of this cottage."

"I don't care," he said, leaning forward, his hand sliding around the back of my neck. "All I wanted was to see you. Everything else is just gravy."

He enjoyed walking through town, though, and he had a good time meeting my new friends when I saw Ipo at the Farmer's Market and she invited us for lunch on a Saturday afternoon that had gone from gray to cloudy to dumping down rain.

"I thought Hawaii was supposed to be sunny all the time?"

"How you think everything stay green?" she asked him.

"Okay." He smiled at her, and I watched her take a breath.

She liked me because I was cute and funny and she thought of me like one of her girlfriends. Her reaction to Sam Kage was all girl.

There was the breadth of his shoulders to consider, the muscles that bunched when he lifted the bags of dog food out of the back of the truck for her, the way he opened the door for her, and the laugh lines in the corner of his smoky-blue eyes. He took off his hiking boots at the front door because no one walked into anybody's house in Hawaii with shoes on; it simply wasn't done. When you had a party, there could be a pile of flip-flops (my word) or slippers (Ipo's word) at the front door. But Sam's boots stood out in the corner, and my sneakers, next to his.

Everyone showed up for lunch. It was the weekend, after all, and Sam sat at the table surrounded by my new friends and ate everything that was put down in front of him. Because Sam fished and the patriarch of the family, my friend Tetsuo, fished, they had a lot to talk about. My host even brought out several of his poles for Sam to look at, and when I seemed bored, Sam explained how expensive they were and how he had nothing that good at home. I asked him what he would need it for since he didn't fish on a boat but off a pier or in a stream. I had, apparently, missed the point.

I was forgotten. The women were all over him. Ipo found him mesmerizing, and Tetsuo's wife Judy, and Randy's wife Maile, could not stop smiling at

him. When he showed Maile that he could lift and carry the cooler full of food easily that she had packed for her son, she made Bambi eyes at him.

I was shaking my head as Kawika joined me in the kitchen.

"Ho, Jory, Sam get all the wahines, check him out, eh?"

The noise of disgust I made sent the man into peals of laughter.

When we got back after a day away, Sam carried the cooler back to the room while I went to the front desk to make arrangements to check out the following morning and for the shuttle to take us to the airport.

"Jory."

When I turned, I saw Aaron sitting out on the veranda alone.

After I finished speaking to the clerk, I jogged over to him.

"Hey."

He cleared his throat. "You changed the billing on your room."

I squinted at him. "Of course."

"Of course," he sighed, looking out at the water.

"So we're leaving tomorrow, but I wanted to thank you for a—"

"It's fine," he said, cutting me off, still not looking at me.

I sat down beside him, hand on his thigh, and he turned and looked at me, leaning close like he had been waiting for me to do exactly what I had.

"Tell me what I could have done to keep you."

"Aaron." I smiled at him. "We both know you have not been pining away for me all this time. It's crap."

"Like I said before," he told me, moving my hair out of my eyes with his long fingers. "You, I never got bored of, and apparently keeping my interest is pretty damn hard."

"I like Jaden."

He nodded. "I do too."

"But?"

"Not enough to keep, J," he told me, his eyes no longer on mine but instead on my mouth. "When I get home, it's gonna be done."

I cleared my throat, and his eyes flicked back. "He wants to go to cooking school."

"Done."

"And a place to live?"

"What are you, his lawyer?"

"Aaron."

He rolled his eyes and leaned back. "Yes, J, where? Downtown?

Lincoln Park? What?"

"Just let him choose, okay?"

"Anything else?"

"It's not because of me, is it?"

"Yes and no," he said, tipping his head, looking at me. "I just, I don't get how I'm supposed to date someone and not end up taking care of them."

"You—"

"And a guy that will let me, I'll get bored of and I won't want because they'll end up waiting on me to do things because what other choice do they have?"

He had a point.

"But a guy who won't let me"—he gestured to me—"that's the guy I do want, but he doesn't want me because he doesn't want me to own him."

I started to smile.

"It's not funny. It's a goddamn mess!"

"You need a guy as rich as you."

"Yeah, not happening."

"There's no gay oil sheiks?"

"You're so funny."

"I thought I wasn't funny."

He groaned and leaned forward, hands on my knees. "That detective is not that hot, you know? I'm much better-looking, smarter, younger, my job doesn't include getting shot at. I don't have—"

"Stop." I reached up and patted his cheek. "He's it, you know he is."

"Yeah, I know." He sighed heavily, turning his head to kiss my palm before he suddenly stood up. "I see how you look at him, and it kills me just a little." He smiled suddenly, and it was very evil. "Poor Hayes—I've at least seen Detective Kage before."

"Don't cackle. It's mean."

"He had no idea that the man in your life could bench press him."

I smiled wide.

"You know, you gave up on that business of yours without much of a fight."

"What?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm changing topics. Try and keep up."

Usually I was the one jumping from one thing to another.

"It sounds like, from what Hayes said, that this Synergy thing was not your idea of fun."

"No, it wasn't."

"And since maybe working for anyone but yourself is a bad idea, if you decide that you want to start your own company back up again and you need capital or a loan or investors, please allow me to help you bankroll your dream. You can pay me back, J. It would only be a loan."

I reached for his hand, and he took it.

"Or not," he told me. "I would love it not to be a loan. I would love it if you finally, for once, took something from me."

"It's a very kind offer that I promise to keep in mind."

His face brightened. "How about a million dollars to sleep with you like that movie with Robert Redford and Demi Moore?"

I rolled my eyes at him as I stood up.

"I want to have lunch with you when I get back into town, all right? Can we do that?"

"You wanna try and be friends?"

"Yes."

"It didn't work the last time."

"Because I didn't want it this bad." He gave me a bittersweet smile.

"Okay."

He nodded, leaned forward, and stopped before our lips touched, a hairsbreadth away. If I wanted the kiss, I would have to take it.

I gave him one on the cheek instead.

"Fucker," he said before he walked away.

I felt good as I ran back to the cottage through the rain. The downpour was amazing, torrential but not cold. But I was from Chicago, so cold was relative. Inside, I realized that I was soaked and was laughing as I looked around. Sam was on the porch, sitting in a chair.

"Hey, did you get wet?"

Nothing.

"Sam?"

He didn't move, didn't turn, and did not even acknowledge that I was there. I moved fast, and when I stepped in front of him, only then did I realize that he was out cold. His head was tipped forward, his chin against his chest.

"Jory."

My blood froze, and I turned to see a man dressed in black with a ski mask on. He had a gun with a silencer on it pointed at me.

"Don't worry, Jory," the stranger said softly. "It's just chloroform. He'll recover in no time."

"Who are you?" I asked as I stepped between the man and Sam, shielding him.

"You think that will save him?"

No, but I wasn't just going to give him a clear shot at Sam.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

"I'm not important."

There was really only one thing it could be. "Why did Cristo Liron send you?"

"I don't know. I'm not paid to care."

"Why didn't you kill Sam already?"

"You're supposed to watch," he said, and I finally saw the other man that I had been expecting. There was no way one guy subdued Sam Kage. But if he was surprised, and carrying something heavy, and he had been jumped and a rag with chloroform had been shoved in his face... then it made more sense.

I turned my head and saw the second man, also in black, holding a tiny video camera. The solid red light on the top of it let me know it was recording.

"We shoot your detective, film your reaction, and then it's your turn, Mr. Harcourt."

Thinking, gambling... What would Cristo Liron most want?

What would he need to see to pay these guys?

I had humiliated him. He would need to take back his lost pride, to save face. It was why he needed to watch my reaction, to put me in my place, to show me that he had all the power and I had none. So if he *had* to see, what did they get if he didn't?

I bolted.

"Jory!"

Who stands there through a monologue and trades banter with the bad guy? My life was not a James Bond movie, I actually would just get shot at some point, and they would shoot Sam too. But if they wanted to kill Sam in front of me, maybe taking that opportunity away would buy me some time, and any was better than none.

"He's dead, Jory!"

Using my name like they knew me—I really hated that assassins were calling me by my first name like we were buddies. When I yelled back at them, rounding the corner fast, I hoped to scare them.

"It's a crime to threaten the life of an officer of the law," I screamed.

"And I will tell everyone what you guys did if there's anything left after Cristo Liron gets through with you!"

"Jory!"

Silencers aren't silent. They make this sort of thwack sound that's like a baseball hitting a pillow but kind of harder, and when things sort of explode around you, you get the idea that bullets are actually flying. A piece of wood shattered next to my face, having torn a chunk out of the wall, and I veered left around the side of the cottage, running as fast as I could down the drive toward the road.

It was dumping down rain, and it was dark, and my guess was that even though they were both dressed like ninjas, neither of them actually was. And it wasn't that I was such a badass. It was just that I had lots of factors on my side. Thunderstorm, country dark not city dark, and they had to move a car and I was on foot.

Normally, trying to outrun a car was stupid. But running down the side of the road in the dark and rain, able to crouch and hide, I was thinking I was in good shape.

Only if you're lucky, or an Olympic gold medalist, can you actually shoot something that's moving at the same time you are. It's hard no matter what any Jerry Bruckheimer summer blockbuster would have you believe. So I ran, heard the roar of a car engine, and increased my speed, thanking God the whole time that I had my sneakers on and not the rubber slippers I had thought about wearing when Sam and I left the cottage hours before.

While I was thanking the Creator, I included a plea for them to have not shot the love of my life before they came after me.

What would I do if they had just shot him? What would I... if he was dead, or bleeding to death as I ran—what would I do?

We had been through so much together, so much time had passed and we were still us, still, amazingly, in love and still strong. If I lost him....

My feet got tangled because my brain had jumped ahead to funerals and a hole the size of Cleveland in my heart, and how in the world I could still be me without knowing that Sam Kage was somewhere smiling, laughing, and breathing the same air I was? I stumbled because the pain threatened to devour me for a moment, but the running was important, the running was necessary. And really, on a two-lane highway, in the open, facing now a roll off a cliff to rocks below or an embankment drop to I didn't know where, my options were dicey.

The squeal of tires was close behind me, the growl of a big engine, and then my shoulder suddenly stung before red-hot heat started to spread through it. I had no idea that I was being shot at with magic bullets that could actually find their target in the dark.

My foot caught, turned funny, and down I went, hard, and it hurt before I was back on my feet. But I felt the change, my balance off, the throb of pain.

There was a hairpin turn ahead. I heard the rev of the motor, turned, and was blinded by headlights before there was pressure everywhere and I had

no air as I went up and up, floating, flying, felt wind, and everything turned upside down. I was tumbling, the car was close, and there were screams.

Please, God, let Sam be safe, I thought before there was nothing at all.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Chapter Seventeen

IT WAS cool, not cold, which was nice. It was soft, whatever I was on, but the sound, like a jackhammer or a sander, was loud and close.

And I was drowning. Slowly, painfully, I was drowning. It was that throbbing where your lungs are going to burst because you can't hold your breath for even one more minute, and it was just the end because the buildup had come and gone with no relief, and I knew that because I had woken up at the last moment.

So close.

And then there were hands in my hair before I was stabbed in the side with a knife. Sharp, hot, driving ice pick punched through my side. I couldn't even scream.

But suddenly I could. I should have thanked someone for the relief of being out of the vise, but then my neck and head were held tight before I was lifted and there was rain. My face was battered with water, and I tried to turn my face.

"Secure him to the board!"

"Hold on, 'kay, don't move!"

I didn't struggle, couldn't, there was no energy. The rain stopped trying to drown me again, and the time between the drops got longer until it was

gone.

BAD guys knowing my name and me being clueless about theirs, that just bugged me so much. In high school I had a job at a drive-in and had to wear a nametag. All kinds of people had used my name who had never asked me for it, and I knew it was stupid, it was part of the retail gig, but still, that had added to my hatred of the job. When I jobs to a bookstore, I had told them that I went by my middle name, Sven, so I had a nametag that said, basically, that I was an exchange student from Sweden. Being called by a different name had been okay as long as it wasn't mine.

"I didn't catch all that. Open your eyes and tell me again."

Open my eyes?

"Please, baby."

There was warm breath on my face, and I whimpered because the sound was a growl, deep and husky, and only one man could make it.

"Sam," I said, but realized that nothing came out.

"Jory," he said and soft silky lips were pressed to my forehead.

My eyes fluttered open, and I saw him beside me. He looked terrible. There were dark circles under his eyes, his color was off, the stubble on his face was verging on actual beard, which made no sense, and he was trembling just a little.

"Sam," I said, but it came out a whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Sam."

He closed his eyes a minute, and I watched his jaw clench tight and the muscles in his neck cord.

I wanted to touch his face, but I was shot. Opening my eyes had drained me. "Love you," I said and closed them.

HE WAS asleep in a chair beside my bed when I woke up again.

Close to the door, the long-sleeve button-down he was wearing open, revealing the shoulder holster and his gun.

"Hey," I called to him.

His eyes tried to open and slid shut, tried again, before he realized where he was and jolted awake. It was like he got hit by a bolt of electricity. His head snapped up, and he was looking at me.

"Sunshine yourself," I croaked out. I was so happy to see him. I tried to reach for him, but nothing happened. My arms didn't move.

He came over to the bed and picked up the cup off the tray beside my bed. "Here," he said, moving the straw to my lips. "Have some water."

I drank a little and then looked at him. The tears came instantly.

"It's so good to see you."

He nodded and I watched him swallow hard. He so obviously couldn't speak.

"You look like crap," I said, staring at him.

He leaned in and kissed me tenderly, lightly, one of his hands in mine, the other in my hair, stroking it gently over and over, pushing it back from my face. He looked down at me, and I saw how red- rimmed and raw his eyes were.

"I love you, Jory."

I couldn't see him because the tears were suddenly there blurring my vision. He kissed my eyes, my cheeks, and then my lips. I parted them, and he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding over mine. It was deliberately slow, tender, and arousing. I couldn't hold in the moan.

"God, Jory," he breathed out.

"Kiss me again."

He kissed me again, slower, deeper, and I got my arm up around his shoulder to keep him there.

His wrapped me in his arms as carefully as he could with the tubes and everything else in the way. He was so warm, and I let out a deep breath.

We stayed close for long minutes, me savoring his warmth, and him, I thought, just me being there.

When he pulled back, he wiped the tears from my cheeks with his fingers, cupping my face in his hands. "I'm sorry, baby. It's all my fault."

I chuckled softly. "Your fault?" I smiled at him. "I don't think so."

"Yes, it is. I should have known that Cristo Liron would send men to settle the score with you. I just never in a million years thought that...." He trailed off, lost in thought, letting his hands fall away before he walked away from the bed, stalking across the room.

"I should've flown here and just picked you up and come home where—I never should've left you alone. Fuck!"

"Stop. You're not psychic, and we deserved a vacation, Sam.

Let it go."

"I—"

"Come back."

He moved quickly, grabbed the chair on his way over, and put it down beside the bed. My hand was taken the second he sat down, and he bent and kissed my knuckles as he gently rubbed my thigh.

"Are those guys dead?"

He was lost in his own thoughts, but I needed him there with me instead of flaying himself for damage he had not done.

"Honey," I called him, which I seldom ever did.

His eyes lifted to mine, and I saw how bad they looked.

"Stop already, what's done is done. We lived. Let's celebrate.

Kiss me again."

He leaned forward, and I kept my eyes open longer than I normally did and so saw his dip closed, marveled at the tears beading on the long golden lashes, and heard his sigh of happiness.

I loved him so much it hurt sometimes.

His lips sealed to mine, but he didn't push inside, instead pulling back fast.

"Awww," I grumbled, "why?"

"You just woke up, and you need to rest. Just talk to me."

"Okay," I agreed. "Tell me, already, did they die? The wannabe ninjas?"

"No. They are, however, in custody, rolling all over Cristo Liron."

"Oh good." I smiled as he gave me another sip of water.

He just looked at me.

I tried to smile.

"You were very brave, leading those guys away from me."

"It was a gamble. I was terrified."

"But you took it, and you made a decision, and it turned out, as usual, to be right."

I scoffed. "As usual, my ass."

"With this kind of stuff, the life-and-death stuff, your track record is sort of amazing."

I nodded, feeling vulnerable all of a sudden, not having looked at the room at all, afraid to, afraid to know how hurt I was. I felt the hot tears come fast.

"Oh, baby, don't cry."

"Please don't leave me." My voice shook.

"No." He leaned over and laid his head on my chest.

I put my hand in his hair; it was so short, poking my hand, but still soft, like puppy fur. I was getting sleepy again. "Stay with me."

Don't leave me."

"You don't ever have to worry about that."

MY EYES opened, and I saw Sam flipping through the channels on my TV. I realized instantly that I was in a different room.

"Hey," I said, coughing. "They moved me."

"Yeah." Sam smiled at me, dropping the controller onto the chair as he moved over to the bed. He poured me some water and put the straw to my lips. "No more ICU for you. Eight days is enough."

"I don't remember being in there that long."

"You didn't even wake up the first day," he told me. "You were real tired."

"That's good, huh?" I smiled at him after I drank a little. "That they moved me so fast?"

"Very good," he said softly, brushing my hair back from my face. "How do you feel?"

"Tell me how I should feel."

"Lucky," he said, slipping his hand into mine. "You're so fuckin' lucky."

I smiled at him "Tell me."

"First things first," he murmured, leaning over and hugging me gently, kissing my cheek before he pulled back. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Okay." He took a breath. "Here's what happened."

I had been hit by the car and had ended up under the car, but it had followed me over the embankment and so had landed at an angle.

I was basically in the engine with the crumpled hood around me.

How? It was just the way everything hit. Apparently, you could wreck a car a hundred times the same way and each time something different would happen. I was hurt but not killed because of the trees, the dirt, the rain, and the wind. It could never be duplicated.

A nurse came in then and smiled big at Sam. He introduced her to me as Kaleo, and he told me she was an angel of mercy. I saw her eyes soften, saw her smile and the basic melting under my boyfriend's smoky-blue eyes. She was a smitten kitten. My temperature was taken, my blood pressure, too, and then she checked my bandages and the IV bag hanging beside the bed.

"Oh, you look better," she told me. "It's nice to see your color come back."

"Thank you for taking care of me." I smiled at her.

"Oh, you're right," she told Sam, "those are the most beautiful brown eyes I've ever seen."

His smile was enormous, and he looked almost proud.

"Sweetheart, it's our pleasure," she told me.

I nodded.

She patted my leg, glanced at Sam, and then left.

"I'm okay, then?" I asked, looking up at him.

"No, baby," he said softly, moving up to the bed, taking my hand in his gently. His voice was like honey as he spoke to me.

"You're not okay."

"What's wrong?" I looked at him.

"We gotta wait for a few more tests, and then we'll know more."

Why were we waiting on tests? "Sam?"

"Just wait. Please. Dane will be here in a few hours, okay? Let's wait for him."

Dane was coming? "Why is Dane coming?"

"Because he's your brother."

"But you can make any decisions for me. You're my partner, it's all legal, and—"

"I know, they know, the hospital knows, but just—we gotta wait for Dane."

"Where am I?" I asked, looking around the pleasant private room.

"You're at Queen's Hospital. It's downtown close to the capitol and Iolani Palace."

I smiled at him. "There's a palace?"

He nodded. "It's pretty. We should go through it before we leave."

"Tell me why Dane is coming?"

"He just is."

"Sam?" My voice rose.

"Shhh," he said, leaning down so I could put my face in his shoulder and he could hold me. "It's all right. Whatever happens, we'll deal with it. Everything's okay."

I was crying. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn't help it. He just held me, and after a few minutes my eyes drifted closed.

"Rest for a little while," he told me. "I'm just gonna stand here and hold your hand, all right?"

I think I answered that was okay.

WHEN I woke up, it was late, and dark in the room. I looked for Sam, and he was there, at the window, standing in the moonlight streaming in through the glass. As I studied him, I saw how broken he looked. I needed to fix him.

"Did you think I was dead?"

He turned his head to me. "When I got there, to the accident site, I was really out of it, really sick, but I could tell... they were cutting you out of the car. When I saw what it looked like—yeah, I thought you were dead."

This was the problem. He was having trouble coming back from that horror.
"I'm sorry, Sam."

He nodded, just barely. "When they had you secured on the board, I heard you call my name," he said haltingly, looking at me. "I won't ever forget what you sounded like at that moment, J. Some things just stay, and that's gonna be one of them. I couldn't even stand up."

I reached a hand out for him, and he crossed the room fast to take it. I pressed his warm palm to my heart. "You need me."

"I more than need you," he said, trembling. "I don't work without you. I just don't."

"Same here," I told him, closing my eyes. I was tired again, and it just sort of washed over me. I was just going to rest my eyes for a second.

IT WAS late. Sam was asleep on a cot next to my bed. I wanted to sit up, but I was at a weird angle.

"What are you trying to do?" He yawned, and I looked down at him, watching him stretch before getting up to come to my bedside.

"How are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"You are so not this light of a sleeper."

"I am when I need to be."

"Gonna come in handy for kids, huh?"

He grinned sleepily. "What're you trying to do?"

"Sit up."

"Okay." He yawned again, shaking with the stretch for a second before pressing the buttons on the side of the bed. I came up slowly.

"There, how's that?"

"Good."

"You want some water?"

"No."

"You want me to go out and get you something to eat? They took the catheter out today, which I could barely watch, Christ, and they said that tomorrow you could have real food, so you can probably start tonight if you —"

"Tell me what's wrong."

He shook his head.

"Why? Afraid if you say it, then it might come true?"

His brows furrowed, and his eyes narrowed; he was really working to hold it together for me.

I took a quivering breath. "Spit it out."

"Dane will—"

"Dane hates delivering bad news as much as you do, and it's not fair to make him."

"It's not that. I just want him here for you."

"I have you. I don't need anybody else to hold me up."

He nodded and took my hand. "Okay, so, there was trauma to your spine, and they think it's okay, but spines are tricky, and right now, as it stands,

you can't walk."

I had not tried to get up. I had a catheter in me, I was hurt, and I had not even thought about moving. But now I was thinking about it.

"What are you doing?"

I was trying to do anything. Wiggle my toes, lift my leg, or bend my knees, but there was nothing. I was dead below the waist.

"J?"

I absorbed everything he'd said.

"Baby."

"Lemme think."

"Okay."

I cleared my throat. "So maybe I'll be fine."

"Yep, it could just be when you wanna walk, you will. They don't know. They can't tell."

"Did they do surgery on my spine?"

"No, but it was compressed in a way that there was no blood, and I guess it needs that, just like your brain."

"But there's no actual spinal-cord injury."

"There is and isn't."

"That's crap."

"That's medicine."

"Explain."

"Right now you're in what they call spinal shock, and it can take up to two months for all the fluid and swelling to go down so they can really figure out how bad the injury is."

"Okay."

"Your doctor, she's good, and she thinks if you have a spinal-cord injury, that the one you have is posterior cord syndrome."

"And?"

"And if you have to get one, that's a good one, 'cause it's not as bad as some of the other ones. It's what they call an incomplete spinal-cord injury, not the total never-walk-again version."

"So even if I have it, I could get better."

"If you think of your injury on a scale of A through E—"

"Really?"

"Why are you giving me shit?"

"Sorry."

He cleared his throat. "Your doctor thinks you're between a D and a C."

"I don't wanna be an A?"

"No, you don't, not in this case."

"Okay."

"But again, two months before all the swelling goes down and they can do an MRI, or whatever, and figure it all out."

"So I should just wait."

"Yes."

"And right now?"

"Right now it's like your legs don't know that they're connected to the rest of you."

"But my legs aren't even hurt."

"Love, you got hurt everywhere. You were checked out for five days, and you've been in and out of consciousness for another three."

Which explained the beard he was sporting.

"We're a matching set now. You don't have a spleen anymore, either."

That made me laugh.

"Why is that funny?"

"Matching set," I said, chuckling.

"You have cracked ribs, and your face and body are covered in bruises and —"

"I get the idea."

"But how you landed, in the mud, and because the whole side of the hill was wet and slick, the car sort of slid to a stop before it hit, and so the impact happened more in this sort of crumpling around the embankment and you, and not on top of you, but more... God, Jory, you should have been crushed. All your bones should be broken. The firemen who cut you out came by to see you because they had no idea how you came out of that in one piece."

"Sam—"

"If you saw the pictures of the car—"

"But I'm fine except for the walking thing."

"We don't know about that yet."

"How can it just magically fix itself?"

"It doesn't magically do anything. It's just your body healing and then either working or not."

"And if it doesn't?"

"What're you asking?"

"You know."

"No, I don't know, because how dare you fuckin' ask it."

"Don't swear."

"I love you on feet or on wheels. Don't be an ass."

He was mad and I liked that. I could deal with indignation that I'd asked. I could not deal with him walking out the door. That would kill me.

"So when do we leave?"

"Soon."

"I wanna sleep in bed with you."

"I know."

"I wanna go home."

"Same here. Just try and rest for now, okay?"

"Okay. You'll stay here right?"

"Where else am I gonna go?"

"I dunno. Out dancing?" I teased him.

"Yeah, right. All I wanna do is sit and watch you sleep."

I closed my eyes and let out a deep settling breath. "Wish granted."

POOR Dr. Ing, she looked befuddled. She was squinting at me, standing between two other doctors, and she had just curled a piece of hair around her ear to keep it from falling in her face. She had a lovely face. Possibly later fifties, early sixties, with dark brown almond-shaped eyes, delicate features, and a warm smile. She had tried for upbeat and positive, but I had too many questions, and I was bogging her down.

"Mr. Harcourt—"

"Jory," I said, cutting her off, pointing at Dane. "He's Mr. Harcourt."

She turned to look at him. "Brother?"

He gave her a ghost of a smile, not really in the mood. "Yes."

The man had breezed into the room two hours earlier and had hugged me very tight for longer than usual. And then he yelled.

"For the love of God, Jory, I can't let you go anywhere!"

Yeah, well.

But the yelling had stopped, and he had calmed, and he and Sam had done the guy clenched and talked while I flipped channels on the TV.

"Aja is pissed at me for making her stay home," he told me.

"God, I hope she forgives me before the baby is born."

"I'm surprised she listened."

"I called her doctor, and he said no dice in the last trimester."

I shrugged.

"You look good," he said before tipping his head at Sam.

"Better than him."

"Yeah, it's my own clothes instead of the hospital ones that do it."

And so we were fine until the doctor came in. She was explaining when I had cut her off.

"But I could be in a wheelchair for life," I said.

"Mr. Har—"

"Jory," I interrupted.

She growled, because it was, like, the fifth time. "Jory, here's the thing. You cannot let yourself dwell on what could happen when right now is the time to concentrate on physical therapy and—"

"But I could."

"You—"

"Right? I could never walk again."

"Yes, but—"

Sam lifted his hand to stop her. "He's gotta work it out, and he's gonna ask a ton of questions really fast in a minute, so if you could just answer, that'd be good."

"Mr. Kage, I—"

"Please," Dane asked her, and really, there wasn't a woman alive who could say no to the man. "It's how his mind works. He needs to go back and forth and weigh things out and think, and that's just how it is. It's his process, and you have to do this for him if your intent is truly to help."

"It is."

"Then," he said, smiling gently at her. "Please."

She took a breath and turned from Dane to face me. "I'm ready."

I grinned. "I'm not scary."

"No, I know, go ahead."

I smiled at her, and her eyes widened just a little, like maybe she was seeing me for the first time. "Can I still have sex?"

"Oh." Not what she had been expecting. "Oh, um, we're asking about...." She cleared her throat. "Okay, yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes." She was emphatic.

"I can still feel everything when I have sex?"

"Mr. Har—Jory, are you sure you're comfortable with your brother be—"

"Can I?"

"Yes." She nodded, understanding how it was going to work, the volley and my rhythm.

"Sam just has to hold me 'cause my legs won't work."

"Right, or you can be on your back and your legs could drape over his shoulders."

I smiled. She was cool, my doctor. "Can I still get hard?"

"Yes," she answered immediately.

"And I can have an orgasm too?"

"Absolutely. There's nothing wrong with your body that would disrupt that."

"Okay," I took a breath.

"Okay." Her smile got big, and I saw the surprise on the faces of the other two doctors with her, one resident, one attending. Maybe she was the one who was normally the scary one.

"I won't have one of those bags, will I? I can still pee and take a dump sitting down."

"No and yes."

"I just have to move myself from the chair to the toilet and back."

"Yes."

"But I can get anywhere in the chair."

"Yes."

"And again, only my legs don't work, everything else is good to go."

"Right."

"Okay." I sighed, taking a deep breath. "All right."

"But Mr. Harcourt, we don't even know if—"

"I'm okay," I said, smiling at her. "I can make love to him." I pointed at Sam. "I can pick up the kids I'm gonna have and roll them around my

house, and I can still take care of myself and work and help provide for my family."

She moved closer to me. "I don't want you to give up before we've even done anything."

"I'm not giving up. I'll try everything, but it's important for me to know that some things won't change, and for certain I can still service my man."

"Yes, if you're in love, the physical piece is very important."

"Exactly."

I did not miss the fact that she was relieved to be done. Sam was massaging the bridge of his nose, and Dane looked, as Dane always looked, cool, unaffected, and poised. It would take more than questions about sex to fluster my brother.

Over the next two days, people came to see me. Aaron was there and stayed all day. He talked to Sam a lot, which was strange, and Dane, and was introduced to my new friends, Ipo, Tetsuo, his wife, and all the surfers. Kawika brought me the paper with my name in it and told me that he had not wanted to see my name in the news, but there it was. I told him that it wasn't my fault.

"Jory, you the kine guy that stuffs happen to you, yeah?"

"No, not—"

"Yes," Dane assured Kawika.

"I figured."

To thank Tetsuo's family for saving my life, Dane had two coolers of food shipped to Chicago for Moses. It was the least, he said, that he could do. My brother, as always, was a big hit. The girls who had found me adorable

and Sam stunning were all in agreement that Dane was the pick of the litter. I just rolled my eyes.

Hayes came to see me to wish me a speedy recovery and told me that he would certainly call me if he should need anything professionally. Under Dane's watchful eyes, no more was said. Aaron brought Jaden the second day, and we talked about cooking school and that I would call him when I got home if he gave me his number.

He gave me his number, asked me to please call, and told me that Aaron and he had already decided, mutually, to call an end to their relationship. Sitting on the bed beside me, Jaden had sighed deeply.

"What?"

He was looking at Sam. "I want what you have, Jory. I want my own man who only wants me. Once I'm done with school, I'll have something to offer."

"You have a lot to offer now," I assured him. "But yeah, being self-sufficient, there's really nothing like it."

He seemed to be looking forward to it.

"What'd you do?" Sam asked me later that night when we were alone again, Dane having gone back to his hotel to get some sleep.

"Fix everybody while you were here?"

I explained about Jaden and Aaron, and Sam agreed that he could see me having both men in my life.

"I'm sorry?"

He shrugged those muscular shoulders of his. "I told Aaron it was fine by me if you guys want to hang out, and I might even have a meal with him myself once in a while. Maybe."

This was news. "You hate Aaron Sutter."

"I used to. Now I feel sort of bad for him. I mean if the roles were reversed —never mind."

"What?"

"If the roles were reversed and he had you, I couldn't just be your friend, J. I'd grab you and leave for someplace without an extradition treaty."

"That's so romantic."

"You wouldn't think it was if you loved Aaron Sutter instead of me."

"That would never happen."

"No, it wouldn't."

I smiled and took his face in my hands. "It's really okay with you? Me and Aaron, I mean."

"We'll see how it goes. As long as he doesn't fuck up and try an' fuck you, we should be all right."

"Aww, that's so romantic."

"Shut up," he said as he leaned forward to kiss me.

"And stop—"

"Swearing," he growled, "I know."

I would have given him more crap, but he kissed me so I couldn't.

On Monday of the following week, I finally got to go home.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Chapter Eighteen

THE case against Cristo Liron had been dead in the water when he had sent the hit men after Sam and me. There were some internal leaks, some bad intelligence gathering, and more than anything, procedural inconsistencies. But when the two hit men rolled on Cristo, Eddie broke, became a witness for the prosecution, and frightened Adan and Paz into telling everything they each knew.

Agent Calhoun came to see Sam when we arrived home and gave him the good news. Later that night, when I was practicing in the wheelchair, rolling myself from one side of the room to the other, I asked Sam why he thought that Cristo would have taken the gamble that he couldn't kill me and have what happened happen instead of just walking away.

The look I got of absolute bewilderment was cute. "What?"

"Don't treat me like I'm an idiot," I said with a chuckle.

"Jory, most people, when hit men come after them, they get killed. You're lucky, spontaneous, and your guardian angel is overworked and way underpaid."

"I know, right? My angel walks into a bar and the other angels are like, Oh shit, that's the poor sap that's got Jory Harcourt. Look at him, he started drinking again."

Sam was smiling.

"Look at the twitch he's got, poor bastard."

"C'mere." His smile had gone carnal.

"No." I laughed, rolling backward. "Get away from me, ya perv.

I'm in a wheelchair."

"Not for long you won't be," he assured me. "In a second, you're gonna be over my shoulder."

I froze, and when he reached me, he knelt down on one knee, holding the chair so I couldn't move away.

"What's wrong?"

I swallowed down my heart. "I'm scared."

"No reason to be scared."

My breath hitched involuntarily. "What if you can never put me up against a wall again? What if I can't ever wrap my legs around you again? What if _____"

"Stop," he soothed me, his voice a husky rumble. "Listen to me."

I put my hands on him because I had to, always had to.

"I love you and I love being in bed with you, and really that's all that matters. We can figure out everything else, but the weight of this ain't on just you. I wanna be here too, J. I'm invested in this, and I'm not going anywhere. So knock it off, all right?"

I nodded.

"For now, your legs over my shoulders, like the doc said, is gonna work just fine."

And later, in bed, after he kissed up both legs and then rolled forward, draped them into the crooks of his elbows before sheathing himself deep inside my body, I finally got it through my head that he was telling the truth. We were still us, just different. As I yelled his name, his head fell back and he moaned out his orgasm as he bucked hard and fast with his release. I was laughing when he collapsed on top of me, crushing me under him, pinning me to the bed.

"You're heavy."

"I just wanna be buried to my balls in your ass for the rest of my life."

"Lovely," I teased him, heaving for breath. "Get off me, Kage.

You're heavy as shit."

"Don't swear," he teased me in a voice I had never heard before.

When he rolled off of me, I turned to look at him and found him grinning at me.

"What was that?"

"That's what you sound like when you tell me not to swear."

"That's what I sound like?"

He waggled his eyebrows at me, and when I went to smack him, he captured my wrist and pulled me over on top of him. "Now, you can crush me."

"I'm not heavy enough," I said softly, sheepishly, burying my face in the hollow of his neck, licking the salt off his skin, loving him sweaty and sated under me.

"No, you're not," he said, one hand on my ass, kneading gently, the other in my hair as he fisted his hand in it and lifted my head.

"You're perfect."

I wasn't, but the kiss he gave me, with lots of tongue, before he rolled me back over, told me that he thought I was. It was the only thing that mattered.

THERE was a whirlwind of changes. Just like Dane figured, and it was really annoying having the man know things before I did. Mr. Riggs and Mrs. Pearlman from Benchmark had no problem leasing the new office space they had made for Strauss and Harcourt to Harvest Design instead. We paid them, and they paid us when we made something happen. It sounded like it would work out just fine.

I moved into the spacious wood and glass office with Dylan and Fallon, and we made it our own. You walked from a sort of boring space into warmth and a homey feeling, and no one failed to comment on it. And I was surprised how many people there were. Dylan had contacted all our old clients, Fallon had brought new ones, and Aaron Sutter, who was putting up a new hotel in Sydney, Australia, wanted a new logo for his new flagship, The Summerville. It had to incorporate Australia without hint of any traditional symbol, as well as encompass Sutter as a brand.

"Are you kidding?" I asked him. "I never have any luck creating things for you. I failed the first time out, remember?"

"Yeah, but I think that was because I didn't really know what I wanted, either."

I squinted at him as he threw one of those squeezable stress balls against the wall in my office.

"That's annoying, you know."

He grunted from where he was stretched out on my couch.

"Where did you even get that?"

He pointed at the bowl of them on the coffee table beside him.

Dylan had made them with our logo on them. I had just missed that she put some of the damn things in my office.

"You're supposed to use them to release tension, not annoy your designer."

"Who says that annoying you doesn't decrease my stress level?"

My eyes flicked to his, and he waved.

"How's Jaden?" I asked him.

"Good. He's enjoying school, and he met somebody, another aspiring chef just like him."

I rolled my eyes. "That means nothing. I doubt he's replaced you already, Sutter. He knows he needs to give the romantic part time and not jump into bed with someone else."

He gave me a shrug. "You're thinking I'm bothered, and I'm not. I don't even care if we remain friends. Right now, since I'm paying for his education, we have to stay in touch, but beyond the

next two years... who knows?"

"Why?"

"I don't stay friends with my exes," he said, continuing to play handball with something not designed to do that against the wall of my office.

"I'd like to point out that we're exes and trying to be friends."

"That's different," he told me. "You, I loved."

My eyes locked on his.

"It's true, and that's why I'm trying. If this is all I can have, I'll take this."

I smiled at him, and his eyes were warm.

"Oh my God, Jory, can you stop with that already!" Fallon roared as he came through my office door, having hurled it open.

We all froze.

"See," I said, smirking at Aaron. "I told you it was annoying."

"Oh." Fallon's breath caught, and he looked horrified. He had just screamed at easily one of the richest men in the state, if not in the entire Midwest. "Mr. Sutter, I—"

"Sorry." He gave Fallon his dazzler. "I was just trying to piss off Jory."

And when Fallon did the slow pan to me, I had no idea why I was on the receiving end of the look until later.

"You shit!"

Such an outburst from unflappable Fallon Strauss seemed completely out of character for him. "What?"

"You're buddies with Aaron Sutter?"

I made a noise.

"They used to date," Dylan said, cackling.

"Jesus," he said, falling down into the chair in front of my desk.

"Why don't you go faint in your office," I told him.

He just looked at me. "I swear to God, from one day to the next I have no idea what's going to happen with you."

The wheelchair had surprised him when he had first seen me, but not as much, apparently, as my relationship with Aaron Sutter.

"Fun, huh?" Dylan smiled at him. "Welcome to the show."

He looked back and forth between the two of us.

"We could go for yogurt," I offered.

"We love yogurt," Dylan seconded.

He just shook his head.

WHEN Sam got home that night, having started his new job, bringing home mountains of stuff to read every time he came through the door, he was startled to see me.

"What?"

He cleared his throat. "Why're you wearing my catcher's mask?"

Sam had played baseball on a city league with the other guys in the department, and it was nice that when he had left, they had made him promise to come back. He had been surprised at the response from a lot of his fellow officers when he left, especially the other detectives. They had not wanted him to leave. It turned out the gay piece didn't really matter in the big picture of doing your job, backing up your brothers in blue, and just being an honest cop. Sam had a reputation for being fair and hard-working and loyal, and that was all, in the end, that mattered. His captain had asked him to stay, but the field office of WITSEC in Chicago was counting on him, and his new boss, deputy US Marshal Tom Kenwood, had already made sure to pay Sam a visit as soon as we got home. They wanted him, and Sam had given them his word when he accepted the position. I could not have been happier.

"J?"

I lifted the mask to look at him. "Your folks are coming for dinner, and I'm deep frying empanadas to go with the rest of the meal, since your dad likes them so much."

"Sure."

"And since I'm lower now, closer to the stove, I didn't want to get hot oil in my eye."

"Oil can still splatter through the holes," he offered logically.

I held up the round frying screen I had as well. "It's my second line of defense."

"Of course it is." He chuckled, leaning down to kiss me.

I got the feeling I was being placated. "I'm not crazy."

"No, I know." He continued to laugh as he walked into the loft.

"How was your day talking to people going into witness protection and checking on witnesses?"

"Well, I don't have any of my own witnesses yet. I'm just following my new partner."

"You like him?"

"I do. He's a little stiff, but he's gonna bring his wife over here next week, and I figure after that, he'll be better."

"Why?"

He turned to look at me. "'Cause once his wife falls in love with you, he and I will have that between us."

"What if she hates me?"

"Yeah, like that'll happen."

The possibility was kind of small. I was likeable, Dane did always say so.

DINNER had been nice. I loved Sam's parents, and they were both kind of crazy about me. I had gone to bed early, and Sam had stayed up to read, but

when he came to bed, he woke me up. The solid length of the erection pressed to the small of my back let me know what he wanted before a warm hand slid down my abdomen and under the elastic waistband of my pajamas.

"Yes, deputy marshal? May I help you?"

His hand fisted my already hardening shaft, and I pushed back against him in response.

"Oh," I moaned, because it felt so good, his hands on me not gentle, rough with wanting.

His mouth was on the back of my neck, nibbling, sucking, as he slid my pajamas down with one hand moving over my hip and the other grazing my ass.

The moan became a whimper, and I arched my back as Sam groaned.

"I need you," he rasped, and I realized that something was wrong.

"What were you looking at?" I asked, gasping as I heard the snap of the pop-top on the lube before one slick finger grazed between my cheeks.

He didn't answer, but I knew. Whatever he had been reading in those case files had scared him, so he had come to the bedroom to check on me, to assure himself that what he loved was safe and secure. But at some point in his reminding himself that I was fine, he'd become aroused, and I was about to reap the benefit.

"You want me?" I asked, because sometimes his desire ran to silence and urgency.

His breath was hot on my ear as two fingers slowly, gently entered me and just as tenderly began to scissor me apart.

"Do you want me on my knees? I can if you hold me?"

He didn't, and when the fingers eased free, my hole stretched and ready, I felt the first nudge of the head of his penis. My back bowed as I shoved my ass against him.

Taking the motion for the invitation it was, he pressed forward, sliding inside, pushing steadily until I was completely breached and he was fully seated.

He bit down into my shoulder, and I shuddered with the sensation of being completely filled, my channel clenching around him, the muscles contracting and holding him tight.

"Move, Sam, fuck me."

He pulled out and then slid back in, the motion, his angle, putting pressure on my prostate as his hand traveled forward down my thigh to fist my shaft. I cried out, and he pushed up deeper, moving around me, rolling to his knees and taking me with him.

My face was in the pillows, my ass in the air as he kept the persistent rhythm of the slow slide in and the long pull out. The man was huge, and he was letting me feel every single inch of length and girth.

"Fuck," he almost snarled, and his hands were hard on my ass, fingers digging into my flesh as he began to deepen his thrusts but not quicken them. "You are so fuckin' hot."

He liked watching his enormous cock push into my hole, had always loved it, and at that moment, it was taking him over the edge.

"I want you to come," he commanded, leaning over me, pressing his hard, carved chest to my back as he tugged on my cock from balls to head. "I want it all over the bed, J."

His mouth, his hands, the feeling of stretched fullness, the way he pegged my gland... I was a goner. I forgot to breathe for a few minutes, and was light-headed as Sam pounded me through my own roaring orgasm and his.

He was rough, wrenching my head back, holding me under my hips, making sure we were pressed together as tight as we could be as he pumped semen into my ass, coating my insides, and still pushing deeper even as it ran down the back of my thighs.

When he could finally stop, he eased from my spasming channel and fell over on his back, heaving.

I rolled to my side and looked at him. He looked good all disheveled, with his heavy-lidded eyes, and I slid a hand over the six-pack abs, now covered in sweat and come. "You all right?" I teased him.

He nodded but said nothing.

"Sure?"

"You're a fuckin' gift, I swear to God," he said, closing his eyes. "Whatever I need, you give me. I'm so fuckin' lucky."

It was said not as praise, because he wasn't even looking at me, but simply from his heart, because to him, I was everything.

I got up to get him some water, feeling sluggish and slow from the pounding I had taken, and by the time I got back to the bed, I was ready to pass out. I was surprised that he was sitting up against the headboard, eyes huge, staring at me like I was a ghost.

"Jesus, what's with you?"

His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"Sam?"

He swallowed, licked his lips, and sucked in a breath.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I leaned on the doorframe. "I brought you some water."

"Um, J," he said, starting to smile. "Baby, you seem to be on your feet."

I stared at him, and he stared at me.

Eight weeks, closer to nine, had come and gone, and we had weathered it, and we had been busy and had accepted that whatever was going to happen would happen. It had not changed us, the reality of me being in the wheelchair, and we had gone on, preparing for the rest of our lives with the certainty that we would be together. We had even met with a great guy at the adoption agency, who had been thrilled to work with us. Life had gone on, and now it had rendered up a gift.

"I guess maybe we should call the doctor in the morning," was all I said.

He nodded before he rolled out of bed and crossed the room to me fast. Some water spilled when he grabbed me, but it was of no consideration that it was dripping down his back as he hugged the life out of me.

"I didn't care," he told me.

"I know," I said as I leaned far enough to put the glass down on the chest of drawers. "You just love me, Sam, however I am."

The kiss I got, full of love and overwhelming happiness, let me know, as always, that as far as Sam Kage's heart was concerned, I knew what I was talking about.

About the Author

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen. She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.